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PARSHA WEEKLY

PARSHAT NITZAVIM-VAYELECH 5786 • 2026



WORLD MIZRACHI Picture of the Week

The Musmachim program kicked off the new zman with learning Hilchot Niddah with program director Rabbi Binyamin Zimmerman, alongside a practical session with Rabbi Michael Friedman on “Making Meaningful Marriages.” The session is the first of a three-part series on Gottman training for couples counseling, equipping future rabbinic leaders with practical tools to support individuals and couples in their communities. Musmachim is a program of the Religious Zionist Shlichut Center founded by Mizrachi.

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World Mizrahi is the global Religious Zionist movement, spreading *Torat Eretz Yisrael* across the world and strengthening the bond between the State of Israel and Jewish communities around the world.

Based in Jerusalem and with branches across the globe, Mizrahi – an acronym for *merkaz ruchani* (spiritual center) – was founded in 1902 by Rabbi Yitzchak Yaakov Reines, and is led today by Rabbi Doron Perez. Mizrahi's role was then and remains with vigor today, to be a proactive partner and to take personal responsibility in contributing to the collective destiny of *Klal Yisrael* through a commitment to Torah, the Land of Israel and the People of Israel.



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Homecoming

Teshuva vs. Repentance



Rabbi Doron Perez
Executive Chairman, World Mizrahi

The word that our sages consistently use to describe the process of repentance is the Hebrew word תשובה – *teshuva*. It is self-evident from the word that it means something altogether different from repentance which is about remorse and regret.

Teshuva means, as we know – to return. This is an altogether different concept and a total paradigm shift as to what the process of repentance is all about. It's about something much broader than regret and remorse for something we have done wrong. Return means coming back to where we began – in essence to where we belong. The institution in human life that anchors us in place and identity is that of the home. We sometimes need to leave our home and travel great distances to do what we need to do, but we all return home regularly because that is where our life is based and where we truly belong. The process of *teshuva* is therefore clearly a sense of homecoming – a return to the state of where we ultimately should be.

A clear example of this is regarding the great prophet Samuel who was an itinerant prophet who would travel all across the land, teaching, judging, inspiring and uplifting. After all, his mother had dedicated him as a Nazarite to G-d and his life was therefore spent with deep commitment to G-d's children.

The verse states regarding his homecoming after his travels:

וְתִשְׁבֹּתוּ הָרִמָּתָה כִּי־שָׁם בֵּיתוֹ וְשָׁם שָׁפַט אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיָּבֹרֶשׁ שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַה'

“Then he would **return** to Ramah, for his home was there, and there too he would judge Israel. He built an altar there to the LORD.” (*Shmuel I* 7:17)

The word *teshuva* here clearly means homecoming in the deeper sense of the word. The process, the intense days of *teshuva* that we are about to engage in are a spiritual homecoming.

Parashat Nitzavim Always Precedes Rosh Hashanah

Every single year, without fail, the weekly *parasha* that is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah is *Parashat Nitzavim*. On some years, such as this year, when Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot are on Shabbat, it is a double *parasha* of *Nitzavim* and *Vayelech*, however more often than not, *Vayelech* is after Rosh Hashanah. In any case, the short *parasha* of *Nitzavim* always precedes Rosh Hashanah. It seems to be *hashgacha* – providential – the work of providence, that this *parasha* always precedes the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* as it is the source of *teshuva* in the Torah. The word *teshuva* in the context of repentance and returning appears more in this *parasha* than anywhere else in the entire Torah.

There are two separate sections that deal with *teshuva*, the first and main section we will analyze in this article as its contents are quite telling as to the essence of what *teshuva* really means.¹

Happy New Year vs. Rosh Hashanah

The New Year's Eve experience in the Hebrew calendar is unlike any other and could not be more different from the Western world's experience of January 1. Rather than being a raucous experience at the stroke of midnight, the Jewish calendar ushers in Rosh Hashana as a time of envisioning and reflection, a time when we envision with great anticipation the ideal world we would like to live in for the

year ahead and the role that we ought to play in bringing it to fruition. It's a time of deep cognitive reflection when we examine our spiritual and mental paradigms, our thought processes and our mindset in order to best address the salient issues of life in preparation for the year ahead.

That is only the beginning. The two days of Rosh Hashana are part of a ten-day cycle that ushers in the new year, culminating in Yom Kippur, known, of course, as the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, the Ten Days of Repentance and Returning. The days of spiritual mind-mapping which began on Rosh Hashana continue through an intense week of preparation for Yom Kippur, the culmination of these days. The days revolve around a detailed spiritual plan to align our lives with the Divine in every area of our lives. In the *vidui* – personal confession – we strike our chest and heart dozens of times acknowledging where we have deviated and expressing our deepest desire to return to Hashem and our better selves.

In short, it is a time of *teshuva* – returning. We begin the year with the end in mind. Our deep desire to return to first principles, to the values in life that are most important – our relationship with Hashem and the spiritual and moral values that we hold to be most dear.

Teshuva in the Torah

What are these values? It is quite fascinating to go back to the source of *teshuva* in the Torah, the section known as *Parashat HaTeshuva*,² which speaks about our return to Hashem.

Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, one of the great rabbinic precursors to the Zionist movement, mentions a critical insight regarding the process of *teshuva*.³ He highlights the inextricable link between the spiritual return of the Jewish people to Hashem and the physical return to the Land, as clearly evidenced in the Torah in the section dealing with *teshuva* (*Devarim* 30:1-10):

“וְשָׁבָה עִדְהָ אֶל־לִקְיָהּ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלִי כָּל אֲשֶׁר־
אֶנְכִּי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם”

“And you will **return** to the L-rd, your G-d and heed His voice, according to all that I command you today ...”

And immediately afterward in the next verse it says:

“וְשָׁבָה ה' אֶל־קִיר אֶת־שְׁבוּתָךְ וְרִחַמְךָ וְשָׁב וְקִבְּצָךְ
מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפִּיצָךְ ה' אֶל־לִקְיָהּ שָׁמָּה”

“Then, the Lord, your G-d, will **bring back** your exiles.... He will **return** and gather you from all the nations, where the Lord, your G-d, had dispersed you.”

The concurrent processes of the spiritual return to Hashem and the collective return of the Jewish People to the Land are clearly part and parcel of the same process, notes Rabbi Alkalai. It is no surprise, therefore, that the incredible return of millions of Jews to Israel, primarily since the founding of the State, has transpired in tandem with the rebuilding of the spiritual world of Torah learning and living.

This dual return is one of the most extraordinary events, not only in all of human history. It is a rich mosaic of miracles somehow incredibly woven together – the establishment of an independent Jewish State only three years after the ovens of Auschwitz; the creation of a country of refuge for millions of returning Jews from over 100 countries, speaking more than 80 languages, after almost 2,000 years of wandering; the transformation of the Land of Israel from a barren backwater into a flourishing oasis; the revival of Hebrew from an ancient static textual language to the living lingua franca of the Jewish State; the building of a thriving economy which emerged from the depleted pre-State *Yishuv* – and to crown it all: the remarkable rebuilding of the Torah world in general with more Torah learning in our generation, arguably more than any other.

How blessed we are to be continually witnessing and participating in the incredible process of dual return – to the Land and to Hashem.

Since the Torah's dual process of return incorporates both our relationship to the land of Israel and to Torah values in our

life, it is these two that we ought to always strive to return to. We wish to always have as deep and meaningful a relationship as possible with the centrality of the land of Israel in Jewish life and the primacy of the Torah as the driving force of all of our moral and spiritual lives.

So too this year as we approach the new year of 5787. It is three years since that fateful day of October 7th/Simchat Torah 5784. Thankfully all our hostages returned this last year and as we enter this new year, it is the first time in twelve years that there are no hostages held in Gaza. There is much to be thankful for. There are many challenges. The battles on Israel's border with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran continue with constant threats lurking. The global delegitimization campaign against Israel and the security of many Jewish communities around the globe require great attention. Israel is in the midst of a divisive and critically important election campaign – we are a society deeply in need of healing and trust building. There's so much distance between the ideal of life and the reality of where we are – we are all in need of a deep sense of homecoming.

The Days of Awe – the *Yamim Nora'im* – more than any other time is our spiritual homing signal. Through the homecoming device, the *shofar* which is the centerpiece of Rosh Hashanah and the pinnacle of Yom Kippur, is the clarion call to us all to awaken from our spiritual slumber and to return. To come home – to G-d, to a deeper connection to Israel, to ourselves.

1. The second section is three *pesukim* long (*Devarim* 30:11-13) and refers to this *mitzvah*. Ramban sees this *mitzvah* as referring to the *mitzvah* of *teshuva* and hence he explains it in this context. Rashi sees it as referring to the *mitzvah* of learning Torah. All agree that the first *parsha* deals with the *mitzvah* of *teshuva*.
2. *Devarim*, 30:1-10. The root word שָׁב – return – appears here more than in any other place in the Torah, eight times in these ten *pesukim*.
3. *The Writings of Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai*, Mosad Harav Kook (pg. 237, 323-324). He was a prolific writer and activist internationally for the restoration of Jews to the land and reinstatement of eventual Jewish sovereignty.

ESSENTIALS OF JUDAISM/PERSONAL GROWTH

How To Live a Good and Desirable Life



Rabbi Reuven Taragin

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The Best Segulah

The *Midrash*¹ records that many peddlers sold their goods in Tzipori and its surrounding areas, yet one peddler distinguished himself by inviting people to acquire an “elixir of life.” This unusual claim attracted the curiosity of many, including Rabbi Yanai, who came to learn more. The peddler presented them with a *pasuk* in *Tehillim*: “Who is the man who desires life? One who loves days, seeing the good.”² We live desirable lives in which we love every day by focusing on the good in the world around us.

In our last piece, we saw that focusing on the bad “takes one out of this world.” The contrast, focusing on the good, helps us live a good and desirable life. This is why Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, who named his *sefer* “Chofetz Chaim” after this *pasuk*, and thereby, became known as someone who embodied this *pasuk*, identified this *pasuk* as the best *segulah* (auspicious practice).³ Following its words is the best way to live life.

Negativity Bias

One of the challenges we face is that, as human beings, we have a natural tendency to focus on the bad. As Israeli psychologist and Nobel Laureate Professor Daniel Kahneman observed, “Negative experiences loom larger and feel more intense than positive experiences.” It is what causes us to focus on the black dot on an otherwise clean, white page or the one missing tile in an expansive latticework.

Psychologists identify this phenomenon as negativity bias, an innate tendency to emphasize negative experiences over

positive ones. This bias shapes our perception and memory, often causing us to dwell on negatives and failures.

This leads us to focus on the negative aspects in others and in our life experiences. We need to overcome this natural tendency and highlight the positive instead.

How We View Others

The Tiferet Shlomo⁴ explains that this was Yaakov Avinu’s message to his son Yosef when he sent him to “see the peace of his brothers.”⁵ Yosef had continually reported his brothers’ sins to his father.⁶ Yaakov urged him to focus on their positives instead.

Sadly, Yosef did not get the opportunity. His brothers’ hatred for him was so strong that when they saw him coming from a distance, they planned to kill him, and eventually sold him into slavery.⁷ Instead of seeing the positive in one another, the first Jewish family was split by *sinat chinam*, and we, their descendants, have been plagued by it ever since.

Recognizing the positive qualities in others is essential for several reasons. Beyond fostering strong and respectful relationships, emphasizing others’ strengths contributes to mutual personal growth.

Rebbe Nachman MiBreslov⁸ explains how our views of others impacts their life decisions. People seen as wicked or incapable “live down” to those traits, while those seen as righteous or talented aspire to become so. In this way, how we see others can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This point was proven by Dr. Robert Rosenthal, a Harvard psychologist, who conducted a telling experiment in

Yerushalayim to illustrate the power of expectation. PE teachers and students were randomly assigned to one of three groups, but the teachers in each group were given different false pretenses about their students’ athletic potential: average, unusually high, or extremely low.

After weeks of training, the results were astonishingly consistent across all demographics: students randomly labeled as having average potential performed at an average level, those labeled above average performed above average, and those labeled below average performed considerably below average.

This experiment demonstrates that self-esteem and self-image, as well as beliefs about personal capability, are crucial determinants of success. Both external expectations and internal beliefs significantly influence achievement.⁹

Emphasizing the positive in others also facilitates learning from them. As the *Mishnah* in *Avot* states: “[The wise man is] the one who learns from all people.”¹⁰ This is only possible when we recognize the unique contributions of each individual. Rav Kook¹¹ explains that “highly advanced” people are able to learn from every person and every thought and use the lessons to further develop themselves. The wise man learns from *all* people – without exception. For this reason, Rebbe Nachman MiBreslov¹² encourages speaking with others respectfully to be inspired by their unique qualities. He adds that by doing so, we can achieve the loving relationship we are meant to have with others.

How We View Our Lives

Our penchant for negativity also affects how we see our own lives. Instead of

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appreciating how much Hashem does for us, we often fixate on what seems to be wrong.

A story of the Ba'al Shem Tov reflects this idea:

One morning, he and his *chassidim* encountered a water carrier. The Ba'al Shem Tov asked him how he was doing. The man sighed, complained, and lamented, then detailed his many troubles.

Despite his advanced age, he still had to work for a living. Moreover, his strength was failing, and he could barely carry the buckets. His wife had been ill for several years, and his daughters had reached marriageable age, yet he could not find suitable matches for them, etc.

The Ba'al Shem Tov tried to strengthen and encourage him, but the man could not be consoled.

The next day, the Ba'al Shem Tov encountered him again and asked him the very same question: "How are you?"

This time, the answer he gave was completely different:

"Thank G-d, at my age I am still alive and breathing, praying, putting on *tefillin*, and learning Torah every day. Most of my friends have already passed away. Furthermore, although I am no longer as strong as I was in my youth, I am still able to work for my livelihood and do not have to depend on gifts from others.

My wife, who has been ill for a long time, is still alive and is even getting a little stronger, thank G-d. And I am also filled with praise and gratitude to the Holy One, blessed be He, for having blessed me with such successful and talented daughters that it is difficult to find suitable matches for them!"¹³

Our perception of life is fundamentally shaped by our perspective. It is important to remember that every experience ultimately serves a positive purpose.¹⁴

Even when it is difficult to recognize this, we should focus on the abundance of good that is present in our lives, much of which is often taken for granted.¹⁵

A Chassidic Rebbe illustrated this concept to a *chasid* who lamented the bitterness in his life. He first asked the *chasid* to drink a cup of water containing two spoonfuls of salt. Subsequently, he led him to a nearby lake and poured an entire bag of salt into it. Despite the higher salt content, the lake water remained palatable due to its vastness. Similarly, while life may contain bitter experiences, recognizing the abundance of positive elements can diminish the impact of adversity.

We are meant to reflect upon and express our appreciation of this idea when we recite the *brachah* of *Modim* in *Shemonah Esreh* three times a day, in which we thank Hashem not only for giving us life,¹⁶ but also for "the miracles He does with us each day and the constant wonders and goodness He does for us [every] evening, morning and afternoon."

Hashem bestows blessings continuously; the essential question is whether we choose to recognize and appreciate them.¹⁷

How Our Eyes Impact Our Lives

Positivity and appreciation are not just a matter of perspective; they actually impact our reality. In the words of Rav Kook: "The good will that constantly resides within the soul can flip our whole life and reality for the good. The good eye, used to see the positive, affects and repairs reality."¹⁸

The Maharal¹⁹ adds that appreciating Hashem's kindness and expressing our belief that everything He does is for the good have a similar effect.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe made a similar point to a *chasid* who wrote to him from Yerushalayim, complaining about how difficult it was for him to provide for his ten children.

The Rebbe responded with a long letter in which he delineated everything the *chasid* had to celebrate but was taking for granted:

"I was extremely happy to hear the good news that, with G-d's help, you have entered into an appropriate marriage match, suitable and fitting for you. My joy was only increased when I saw that the wedding was held, with *mazal tov*, in the proper and auspicious

manner, and above all, my heart rejoiced to read that peace and harmony in your home have become your lot. Not everyone finds their *bashert*; I am happy that you did. I was delighted to read in your letter that your first-born son was born to you, healthy and whole. Not everyone merits having children.²⁰ Afterward, G-d did not leave you, and a year later, a daughter was born. *Mazal tov!* And now, once again, there is a cry of joy and celebration at the birth of your third son and fourth child... And all of them are healthy and well, proceeding on the proper path. Did you know that not everyone is privileged to have all this?

And how great is the goodness that the Creator has bestowed upon you in granting you a roof of your own, because, to the best of my knowledge, many people live under a roof that does not belong to them, but rather is rented.

And, to top it off, you have the *zechut* of living in the holy city of Yerushalayim. I wish I merited that!²¹

After listing all this, the Rebbe added in the margin that "if you will have the wisdom to thank G-d for all the goodness He has given you, and to dance and rejoice with great strength and gladness over all the goodness that G-d has bestowed upon you, you will emerge from every trouble and constraint. And the Almighty, who gave you this apartment, will also expand your boundaries."

May internalizing the significance of *ayin tova* and applying it in our perception of the world grant us comparable Divine assistance.

1. Vayikra Rabbah 16:2. See also Avodah Zarah 19b, which tells a similar story.
2. Tehillim 34:13.
3. Chovat Hashemirah, Pereh 7.
4. Tiferet Shlomo, Vayeshev, d.h. Lech.
5. Bereishit 37:14.
6. Ibid., 37:2.
7. Bereishit 37:18-28.
8. Likutei Moharan Kamma 282.
9. From "We Have Nothing To Fear But Fear Itself" by Rav YY Jacobson, HPW, Shelach 5786.
10. Avot 4:1.
11. Orot HaTeshuvah 1:13 (pg. 17).
12. Likutei Moharan Kamma 34:8.

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ALLUSIONS AND ILLUMINATION: INSIGHTS OF THE BA'AL HATURIM

Parshat Nitzavim – Teshuva of the Circumcised Heart



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There is something striking about *Parshat Nitzavim*, following the harsh rebuke of *Ki-Tavo*, beginning not with failure but with standing:

“אַתָּם נִצָּבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם” – *You are standing today, all of you* (*Devarim* 29:9).

The Torah speaks to a people standing on the threshold of a new chapter, poised to enter *Eretz Yisrael* and renew their covenant with Hashem. In this moment of collective standing, the Torah introduces one of its most profound descriptions of *teshuva*:

“וַיֹּמַל ה' אֶל-לִבִּיךָ אֶת לִבְבְּךָ וְאֶת לֵב בְּרִיעְךָ לְאַהֲבָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ לְמַעַן חֲיֶיךָ”

“*And Hashem your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love Hashem your G-d with all your heart and all your soul, so that you may live*” (*Devarim* 30:6).

Teshuva is not described merely as correcting behavior, confessing wrongdoing, or resolving to do better. It is described as a circumcision of the heart.

The Ba'al HaTurim, in one of the most enduring Elul teachings in his commentary on the Torah, observes:

“אַתָּה לִבְבְּךָ וְאֶת לֵב” – ר"ת אלול

The initial letters of *et levavcha ve'et levav* spell אלול. He immediately connects the allusion to the practice of rising early for *Selichot* beginning with Rosh Chodesh Elul. He then adds a second allusion: “לִלְיָא הָאֲמַנְתִּי לְרֹאוֹת בְּטוֹב ה'” (*Tehillim* 27:13), in which *lulei* contains the same letters as Elul, expressing the trembling awe that

begins in this season. Finally, he notes that “אַתָּה לִבְבְּךָ וְאֶת” has the numerical value of “זֶה לַיְמֹת הַמְּשִׁיחַ” – “this refers to the Messianic era.”

The acronym itself is not necessarily original to the Ba'al HaTurim; it is also preserved in the Torah commentary of R. Chaim Paltiel, an earlier medieval commentator. Still, the Ba'al HaTurim stands among the earliest extant commentators to connect these words with Elul, and it is his formulation and connection to the custom of reciting *selichot* that became particularly influential. Why should the name of Elul be encoded specifically in “*your heart and the heart*”? Perhaps because Elul is ultimately not about doing more; it is about becoming more capable of feeling. Through introspection, the *Selichot* of Elul, the *shofar*, the repeated recitation of the Thirteen Attributes, we may reach a place where the heart can once again hear what it has learned to ignore. The deepest work of Elul is not simply to change one's actions; it is to change one's capacity for response.

“וַיֹּמַל ה' אֶת לֵב בְּרִיעְךָ” – according to the Ramban, does not refer merely to the assistance Hashem provides an individual struggling with his or her evil inclination (see Ibn Ezra); it ultimately describes a transformation in human nature itself. Since Creation, human beings have possessed genuine free choice, but there will come a time in the future, i.e., *Yemot HaMashiach*, when the human heart itself will be transformed. The desire for evil will no longer exert its pull and the heart will

naturally incline toward what is right as Yirmiyahu prophesied:

“וְנָתַתִּי אֶת תּוֹרָתִי בְּקֶרְבָּם וְעַל לִבָּם אֶכְתֹּבֶנָּה” – *I will place My Torah within them and write it upon their hearts* (*Yirmiyahu* 31:32–33), and Yechezkel promised:

“וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב חָדָשׁ וְרוּחַ חָדָשׁ אֶתּוֹ בְּקֶרְבָּכֶם” – *I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you* (*Yechezkel* 36:26).

The ultimate redemption, in Ramban's vision, is therefore not simply a change in circumstances, but is a change in human interiority as the heart itself becomes different. This explains the Ba'al HaTurim's cryptic conclusion:

“אַתָּה לִבְבְּךָ וְאֶת” – בגימטריא זה לימות המשיח.” The circumcised heart is not merely an Elul process, but is a messianic destiny of humanity to reach a point at which the good is no longer experienced as an external demand imposed upon the self, but as the deepest expression of the self.

The Sforino offers a more intimate interpretation. For him, circumcision of the heart means that Hashem will remove the confusion and distortion that prevent a person from recognizing truth. Once those obstructions are removed, a person who strives to cleave to G-d will recognize His goodness and will consequently love Him. The Sforino therefore introduces another dimension to *teshuva*: *Teshuva* requires clarity.

We often imagine that our primary problem is weakness: *I know what is right, but I cannot make myself do it*. The Sforino suggests that sometimes the deeper problem precedes weakness; we do not see clearly

as we become accustomed to rationalizations. We normalize what should disturb us and we become desensitized to the distance between who we are and who we know we ought to be. The heart develops a kind of spiritual cataract. To circumcise the heart is to remove the obstruction.

Perhaps this is why Elul is a month of both fear and hope. The Ba'al HaTurim hears in *lulei* the trembling of “חודתי נגד” – “from Elul onward I trembled before G-d.” But the very *pasuk* he chooses begins with faith: “לולא האמנתי לראות בְּטוֹב ה'” – *Had I not believed that I would see the goodness of Hashem...* The trembling of Elul is the trembling of someone who still believes that transformation is possible.

Lastly, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov interprets the metaphor of circumcision in a startlingly psychological direction. In *Likutei Moharan* (141), Rebbe Nachman asks what it means for the heart to be circumcised. He explains: A person cannot truly regret what he cannot truly feel. As long as the heart remains *arel*, i.e., uncircumcised, sealed, insensitive, protected by its own defenses, a person may intellectually know that he has done something wrong without experiencing genuine remorse. He can say *chatati* and recite *Ashamnu*. He can articulate precisely what he should have done differently, yet, something essential may still be missing. The heart has not been reached.

Rebbe Nachman therefore describes the circumcision of the heart as creating a *chahal*, an open space within the heart – the sealed heart becomes permeable. Once that happens, a person can finally feel the

true pain and genuine remorse for what he has done. Sometimes we think that we need to become less emotional in order to confront our failures honestly. Rebbe Nachman suggests almost the opposite – we need to become more capable of feeling, for a person can only return to something to which he is emotionally connected.

The Torah does not say merely: “ומל ה' את” – *G-d will circumcise your heart.*

It continues: “וְאֵת לִבְבִּי זָרַעְךָ” – *and the heart of your offspring.*

Rebbe Nachman understands this expansively: When a person's heart becomes genuinely opened, it reverberates outward to the hearts that are spiritually connected to him. The language of “לבבך ואת לבב את” therefore becomes much more than a mnemonic for Elul – it becomes a theology of spiritual influence as one heart awakens another. A parent/person who genuinely changes the texture of his inner life alters the spiritual atmosphere around him. This explanation offers new depth to the familiar idea that children learn not only from what their parents teach them but from who their parents become – the opened heart becomes generative.

Perhaps this is why the Ba'al HaTurim's three allusions belong together:

אלול – “את לבבך ואת לבב”

לולא – “לולא האמנתי לראות בטוב ה'”

“זה לימות המשיח” – the destiny of the circumcised heart.

Elul stands between the trembling of the present and the hope of the future, asking of us to become honest about where we are, while believing passionately in where we can yet go. As we approach Rosh Hashana, perhaps our greatest *tefillah* should not simply be that Hashem forgive our failures. It should be that He give us the capacity to feel, to recognize, to love, and to change.

May this Elul be more than a season of religious activity. May it be a season of inner opening. May we rediscover the capacity to be moved by Torah, by *tefillah*, by another person's pain, by the privilege of our lives and by the extraordinary possibility of becoming different.

And may the transformation of one heart awaken another:

“אֵת לִבְבְּךָ וְאֵת לִבְבִּי זָרַעְךָ.”

Teshuva begins in the private chamber of one human heart, but it was never meant to end there. May Hashem open our hearts this Elul, and through them open the hearts of our children, our communities, and ultimately the heart of *Am Yisrael*.

And may the day come when the Ba'al HaTurim's final allusion becomes reality:

“אֵת לִבְבְּךָ וְאֵת” – “זֶה לִימוֹת הַמָּשִׁיחַ.”

May we merit to see the day when the circumcision of the heart is no longer the work of individuals struggling toward redemption, but the defining reality of a redeemed nation and world.

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13. As quoted by Rav Yechezkel Weinfeld in *Motzi Asirim*, pg. 8. The Ba'al Shem Tov added that this resolved the Tosafot's question concerning the apparent contradiction between the statement that a person's livelihood is allotted to him from Rosh Hashanah to Rosh Hashanah and the statement that a person is judged every single day: Although the amount a person will receive is fixed from Rosh Hashanah, the manner in which he

will receive that allotted amount is a new matter that is judged each and every day.

14. *Ta'anit* 21a and *Berachot* 60b.

15. See *Bava Metzia* 86a; *Ohr HaChayim*, *Shemot* 22:6; and *Kav HaYashar* 18.

16. This alone should be something we appreciate. See *Eichah Rabbah* 3:13.

17. See Rav Frand on the *Parashah* (pg. 262-263), who explains *Devarim* 11:26-27 this way. See also *Emet*

Va'Emunah (Kotzk), which explains *Devarim* 3:25 this way.

18. *Orot HaTeshuvah*, *Perek* 9.

19. *Netivot Olam II*, *Netiv HaBitachon Perek* 1. See also *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* (*Vayechi*, d.h. *Mima'aseh*), *Mei Marom* (*Perek* 25), and the *Metzudat Dovid* (ad loc), who explains *Tehillim* 90:14 this way.

20. The Rebbe himself died childless.

21. *Be'er HaParshah*, *Miketz* 5786.

Halachic Q&A



Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon

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What is the blessing on Cookies and Cream ice cream? Does it depend on the amount of cookie bits in it?

It's complicated. In practice, just as people generally make a *shehakol* on *schnitzel* (despite the breadcrumbs being *mezonot*), because the crumbs are only there as seasoning, it seems the same would apply here. However, it is not so straightforward, and if there are a lot of cookie bits in it, there would be grounds to make a *mezonot*.

My practice is to take a small amount of *shehakol* (the ice cream) and make the blessing, and then take a small amount of *mezonot* (either the cookie or the cone) and make that blessing as well.

One who only makes a *shehakol* or only a *mezonot* fulfills their obligation and has what to rely upon.

In our community, it is difficult to get a minyan together at the scheduled time for davening as there are always a few people who arrive late. Therefore, it will be difficult to say Selichot before Shacharit (and presumably impossible to find a minyan at night). Is it permissible to say Selichot either in the middle of or after Shacharit?

Selichot may also be recited after the prayer service. Therefore, it seems preferable to finish davening and then say *Selichot*.

If it would be more acceptable to the congregation, in principle, one could say *Selichot* in this situation even after the *Amidah*, as is done with *Selichot* on fast days. However, it may be preferable to say them at the very end, so that the congregation does not come to think that the natural place for these *Selichot* is after the *Amidah*, and instead understands that they are being said at the end because of the practical constraint.

I was in a certain town for Shabbat and noticed that in the building I was staying in, they had placed a mezuzah at the exit from the elevator (on the right side of the exit into the hallway) on every floor. Is there an obligation to do this, or is it a good stringency to follow, or is there no need at all? Of course, the elevator is less than 4 x 4 amot, and nobody stores anything inside the elevator.

In the past, people generally did not put a *mezuzah* on elevators. Why?

According to the basic law, there is no obligation to affix a *mezuzah* to the entrances of an elevator, since the elevator cabin is considered a temporary space that is not suitable for dwelling, and the entrance, which is not permanent, lacks the *halachic* significance of a doorway.

This is explained in *Sukkah* 8b, which states that a temporary gatehouse is exempt from *mezuzah*. The Rambam (*Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuzah* and *Sefer Torah*, 6:9) writes similarly.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, in *Halichot Olam* (Volume 8, *Mezuzah*, section 33), ruled accordingly that an elevator is completely exempt from *mezuzah*. Similarly, Rabbi Chaim David Halevy, in *Shut Mayim Chaim* (Vol. 3, no. 30), writes that an elevator is comparable to a car: it is not a house and is exempt from *mezuzah*.

Likewise, *Shut BeTzel HaChochmah* (Vol. 3, no. 84) rules that the doorway on each floor is exempt, because when the elevator is not there, there is simply an open space. This also follows from the words of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach in *Minchat Shlomo* (Vol. 2, no. 97, section 23): the elevator entrance is not considered a fully-fledged doorway because it changes constantly. However, he added that because of the uncertainty, it is preferable to affix a *mezuzah* without a blessing.

On the other hand, in *Shut Minchat Yitzchak* (Vol. 4, no. 93), it is written that it is appropriate to affix a *mezuzah* inside the elevator, because it has the status of a *beit sha'ar* (entranceway). Nevertheless, fundamentally, a temporary dwelling is exempt, as ruled by the Rambam (*Hilchot Mezuzah* 6:9) regarding a ship, since its dwelling is temporary. We also learn in *Masechet Sukkah* (8b) that a temporary *beit sha'ar* is exempt from *mezuzah*. Therefore, he writes that it is appropriate to affix one without a blessing, although someone who wishes to rely on the lenient opinions certainly has grounds to do so.

However, the books *Chovat HaDar* (chapter 5, section 11) and *Chut Shani* (*Mezuzah*, 286, section 20) rule that a *mezuzah* should be affixed on the right side of the exit from the elevator on each floor.

Although elevators generally do not have an area of four by four *amot* (and therefore are not considered a house – see *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 286:13, based on *Sukkah* 3), there is nevertheless room to require a *mezuzah* because the elevator leads to a place that is itself obligated in *mezuzah*.

Practical Halacha

According to the basic law, there is no obligation to affix a *mezuzah* to elevator entrances. The widespread practice of not doing so is based on the rulings of major *halachic* authorities, including Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, and this is also reported in the name of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and others. Someone who wishes to act stringently and be concerned for the opinions that require a *mezuzah* (such as Rabbi Nissim Karelitz and *Chovat HaDar*) may affix one without a blessing (as recommended by Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach), on the right side of the entrance when exiting the elevator into the hallway on each floor.

● Compiled and Translated by Elan Finkelstein.

הפטרת נצבים-וילך

"וּמִשׁוֹשׁ חֶתָן עַל כָּלָה יִשִּׁישׁ עָלֶיךָ אֶ-לֶקֶיךָ"

הרבנית שרון רימון
Tanach teacher and author



פוגע בהדרו ובטהרתו החיצונית כדי להגן על הכלה שלו, על עם ישראל.

וגם בסצנה הזו, כמו בקודמת, מדגיש הנביא שעם ישראל כבר איננו כאלמנה עזובה, אלא כאשה אהובה שחתנה יוצא להגנתה: "וְקָרְאוּ לָהֶם עִם הַקֹּדֶשׁ גְּאוּלֵּי ה' וְלֹךְ יִקְרָא דְרוּשָׁה עִיר לֹא נִעְזְבָה" (יב).

את פשר המהלך כולו מגלה הנביא בפסוק המסיים את ההפטרה: "בְּכָל צָרְתָם לוֹ צָר, וּמִלֶּאף פָּנִיו הוֹשִׁיעַם, בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ וּבְחַמְלָתוֹ הוּא גָּאֵלָם, וַיִּנְשָׂאֵם כָּל יְמֵי עוֹלָם" (ס"ג, ט).

ה' אינו צופה מן הצד בסבלם של ישראל, אלא הוא חלק ממנו. צרתם של ישראל היא צרתו. גאולת עם ישראל איננה רק למען רווחתם האישית, אלא יש בה מימד של נישואין - חיבור מיוחד עם הקב"ה, שהוא תכלית הגאולה. הברית בין ה' לעם ישראל היא ברית נצח מיוחדת, שיש בה שותפות: צרתם של ישראל היא צער השכינה, חסרון בהתגלות ה' בעולם, וה' נמצא עם עמו בכל צרותיהם, כואב את כאבם, ופועל למען גאולתם. הוא אינו מוכן להישאר דומם; הוא מפקיד שומרים שלא יתנו לו דמי, ולבסוף יוצא בעצמו אל הגת ומכתים את בגדיו בדם אויביהם, ומושיע אותם, וכל זה מתוך אהבה וחמלה ורצון להגיע אל הקשר המלא של "משוש חתן על כלה".

הקרב: "על חומתֶיךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם הִפְקַדְתִּי שְׁמִרִים, כָּל הַיּוֹם וְכָל הַלַּיְלָה תִּמְיֵד לֹא יִחָשׂוּ, הַמְזַכְרִים אֶת ה' אֵל דָּמִי לָכֶם. וְאַל תִּתְּנוּ דָּמִי לֹו עַד יִכּוֹנֶן וְעַד יִשִּׁים אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם תְּהִלָּה בְּאַרְצָךָ" (סב, ו-ז).

ירושלים עדיין חרבה והדרך לגאולה רצופה כאב. ה' בעצמו מפקיד שומרים על החומות ומצווה עליהם שלא לתת לו מנוח. הוא אינו יושב שליו ושקט בהיכלו, או בחופתו, אלא דורש מנציגיו להזכיר לו ללא הרף את ייסורי עמו, מפני שהמרחק בין הבטחת החופה לבין המציאות בפועל אינו נותן לו מנוח. ה' נשבע לפעול בעצמו כדי להושיע את עמו: "נִשְׁבַּע ה' בַּיָּמִינוֹ וּבְזִרְעוֹ עֲזָו אִם אֶתֶּן אֶת דִּגְלָךְ עוֹד מֵאֶכָּל לֹאֲבִיבֶיךָ וְאִם יִשְׁתּוּ בְּנֵי נֶכֶד תִּירוּשָׁף אֲשֶׁר יִגְעֶת בּוֹ... עֲבְרוּ עֲבְרוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵי פִנּוֹ דֶּרֶךְ הָעָם סִלּוּ סִלּוּ הַמִּסְלָה סִקְלוּ מֵאֲבָן הַרִימוּ נֶס עַל הָעַמִּים... הִנֵּה יִשְׁעֶךָ בָּא הִנֵּה שֹׁכְרוֹ אֹתוֹ וּפְעֻלָּתוֹ לְפָנָיו" (ח-יא).

הפעילות של ה' למען ישועת עם ישראל מגיעה לשיא בפרק ס"ג. הנביא צופה בדמות בודדה החוזרת משדה הקרב: "מִי זֶה בָּא מֵאֲדוֹם, חֲמוּץ בִּגְדָדִים מִבְּצָרָה... מְדוּעַ אָדָם לִלְבוֹשֶׁף וּבְגָדֶיךָ כְּדֶרֶךְ בָּגֶת?" (סג, א-ב). התשובה מדהימה בעוצמתה: "פְּוֶרָה דֶּרֶכְתִּי לְבָדִי וּמַעֲמִים אֵין אִישׁ אֶתִּי... וַיֵּז נֶצְחָם עַל בְּגָדִי וְכָל מְלִבוּשֵׁי אֶגְלָתִי" (סג, ג). זהו היפוך גמור מבגדי החתונה של הפתיחה. בגדי הישע המהודרים הופכים לבגדים מוכתמים ("אֶגְלָתִי" מלשון גועל ולכלוך, לצד שורש גאולה). **הקדוש ברוך הוא אינו שולח מלאך או כוח מופשט להושיע את ישראל; הוא יורד בעצמו אל הגת, אל זירת המאבק המדממת, ונלחם במו ידיו בכוחות העוול.** אהבתו של ה' לעמו מתגלה כאן בשיא עומקה: היא אינה אהבה תיאורטית הנשארת במרומי שמיים. כשאדם אוהב באמת, הוא מוכן להיכנס לבוץ, ללכלך את הידיים, ולשאת את מחיר המאבק עבור האהוב. ה' כביכול

הפטרה של פרשת נצבים-וילך, החותמת את שבע דנחמא, נפתחת באחד מתיאורי השמחה המרוממים ביותר במקרא: "שֹׁשׁ אֲשִׁישׁ בָּהּ תִּגַּל נֶפְשִׁי בְּאַלְהֵי".

בחלק הראשון של ההפטרה (ס"א, י - ס"ב, ה) מתוארת הגאולה כחתונה של הקב"ה עם כנסת ישראל: "כִּי הִלְבִּישְׁנִי בְּגָדִי יִשַׁע מְעִיל צִדְקָה וְעֲטִנִי, כְּחֶתֶן יִכְהֶן פָּאָר וְכָפֶלָה תַּעֲדָה כְּלִיָּה" (ס"א, י).

בגדי החתן והכלה מייצגים את הטוהר והשלמות של מעמד החתונה. כנסת ישראל אינה עוד "עניה סוערה" או אלמנה עזובה עטויה שחורים, אלא כלה המתקשטת לקראת חיים משותפים: "לֹא יֵאָמֵר לָךְ עוֹד עֲזוּבָה וְלֹאֲרִצָּךְ לֹא יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שְׂמָמָה כִּי לָךְ יִקְרָא חֶפְצִי בָּהּ וְלֹאֲרִצָּךְ בְּעוֹלָה כִּי חֶפֶץ ה' בָּךְ וְאַרְצָךְ תִּבְעַל". הנישואין המחודשים מאפשרים צמיחה והתחדשות: "כִּי כֶאֱרֹץ תּוֹצִיא צִמְחָה וְכִגְנָה יִרְעִיקָה תִּצְמַח בּוֹ אֶדְנִי ה' יִצְמִיחַ צִדְקָה וְתִהְיֶה נֶגֶד כָּל הַגּוֹיִם" (ס"א, יא).

נשים לב שהצמיחה המתוארת כאן היא גם פיזית (הארץ לא תהיה שוממה), וגם רוחנית (ה' יצמיח צדקה ותהילה, כך שעם ישראל יזכה לכבוד ולמעמד בין העמים: "וְרָאוּ גוֹיִם צִדְקָה וְכָל מְלָכִים כְּבוֹדָךְ וְקָרָא לָךְ שֵׁם חֵדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר פִּי ה' יִקְבְּנוּ" (ס"ב, ב)). כתוצאה מכך עם ישראל הופך ל"עֲטֻרַת תְּפָאֶרֶת בֵּיד ה' וְצִנִּיף מְלוּכָה בְּכָף אֱלֹהֶיךָ" (ג).

הקשר בין בני זוג ביום חתונתם הוא קשר של הדדיות, שמחה, ושלמות, וכך מתואר המפגש בין ה' לעם ישראל בעת הגאולה: "וּמִשׁוֹשׁ חֶתָן עַל כָּלָה יִשִּׁישׁ עָלֶיךָ אֶלֶקֶיךָ" (ס"ב, ה). זוהי מדרגה של גאולה שלמה מתוך אהבה, טוהר, הרמוניה וחגיגות.

אולם, בפס' הבא מתרחש מעבר חד ודרמטי. מאולם החתונות הפסטורלי אנו עוברים בבת אחת אל זירת

Leaving a Mark That Will Last a Lifetime



Sivan Rahav Meir
World Mizrahi Scholar-in-Residence

One night at the Western Wall in the midst of *Selichot* prayers, I wondered when the thousands of teenagers around me would get up the next morning. It was already after 1 o'clock in the morning and they were still chanting, if not roaring, *piyutim*. They would probably be late for school the next day, but this unique experience would provide a lesson and leave a mark on them that would last a lifetime.

We learn not only from classes and lectures; we educate ourselves through internalized experiences and events. The Torah portion of *Vayelech* is concerned precisely with this idea. It describes the *mitzvah* performed when the entire nation gathers together in Jerusalem at the close of the Sabbatical year to hear the reading of the Torah. Everyone must come – even babies who do not understand what they are hearing. Why? In order for the experience to leave a mark. “Let their children also, who do not understand, hear and learn to fear the Lord your G-d.” How is it possible to teach fear of G-d? It's the atmosphere that leaves a mark, that engraves an indelible impression on the heart. The power of the moment affects us for generations to come.

The *Yamim Nora'im* are the perfect time for education through experience. From *Selichot* to hearing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah; from the *seudat hamafseket* on *erev Yom Kippur* to the building of the *sukkah*. Even children raised on cell phones and computer screens are thrilled by the experience of hearing – and sometimes even blowing – a real *shofar*, or shaking an actual *lulav*. These are moments that bring our traditions to life, creating powerful memories and lessons that can remain with our children, and with us, for a lifetime.

■ ■ ■

Have you ever heard the expression *machshavot zarot* – foreign thoughts? We tend to assume it means inappropriate or negative thoughts. But if that were the case, why not simply call them forbidden thoughts? What exactly makes a thought “foreign”?

Rabbi Menachem Brod offered a beautiful explanation in the *Sichat HaShavua* newsletter: A thought can be perfectly good and worthwhile, yet still be “foreign” to that particular time and place. It simply does not belong there right now.

For example, thinking about something we learned in Torah is wonderful. But if that thought distracts us in the middle of prayer, it becomes a “foreign thought.” This is simply not the time or place for it. Thinking about a new volunteer project is positive, too. But if it pops into a father's mind in the middle of a heart-to-heart conversation with his son, it is a “foreign thought.” And there are countless other examples.

Here is one that is especially relevant right now: We are in the month of Elul, and also in the midst of a heated election season. Politics can and should be discussed. But we have also been given an entire month devoted to drawing closer to G-d, to working on ourselves, to beginning again. Spending all of Elul consumed exclusively by political updates – that, too, is a “foreign thought.”

May we be blessed with as many good thoughts as possible – thoughts that belong to the moment and the place.

■ ■ ■

This Shabbat is the final Shabbat of the Jewish year. Our sages teach that the last Shabbat of the year gives us an opportunity, in a sense, to “repair” all

the *Shabbatot* of the past year, but it also sets the tone for the year ahead. That is why many people make a point of doing something extra on this Shabbat, honoring it more than usual: bringing Shabbat in a little earlier and extending it a little longer, making a special effort in the way they treat their family, inviting guests who may have nowhere to spend Shabbat, and more.

As on every Shabbat, we will continue with the weekly Torah reading. *Parashat Nitzavim* is part of Moshe Rabeinu's final address to *Am Yisrael* – and, through them, to all of us. It is one of the shortest portions in the Torah, just 40 verses long, and the eighth *parashah* in the Book of *Devarim*.

The *parashah* opens with the words: “You are standing today, all of you.” Despite everything you have endured, despite all the difficulties along the way, you are not weak or defeated. You are *nitzavim* – standing firm, with strength, confidence and unity.

The *parashah* reminds us that these days before the new year are an opportunity to return to ourselves, both as individuals and as a nation. Moshe Rabeinu teaches that the ability to return, to change and to repair is always there. It is possible. The goals he sets before the Jewish people, and before each one of us, are not impossibly distant. They are very close: “For this commandment that I command you today is not beyond you, nor is it far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say: ‘Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it to us, so that we may hear it and do it?’ Nor is it across the sea, that you should say: ‘Who will cross the sea for us and bring it to us, so that we may hear it and do it?’ Rather, the matter is very close to you – in your mouth and in your heart – to do it.”

For the Shabbat Table



Rabbi Danny Mirvis

CEO, World Mizrahi

Rabbi of Ohel Moshe Synagogue, Herzliya Pituach

“You are all standing today before Hashem your G-d – your heads, your tribes, your elders and your officers – every man of Israel. Your young ones, your wives, and the convert who is in the midst of your camp, from your woodchopper to your water drawer.” (Devarim 29:9-10)

This week’s Torah reading commences with a list of all the members of the nation who are to enter a covenant with Hashem.

What is the meaning of the final phrase – “from your woodcutter to your water drawer?”

Normally, when we use phrasing “from X to Y,” we refer to two extreme opposites, such as from A to Z, from the greatest to the smallest, from head to toe.

But here, on the surface, both the woodcutter and the water drawer occupy the very bottom rung of the social ladder. If the Torah had said “from your leaders to your woodcutters” or “from the princes to the water

drawers,” the spectrum would be clear. But why list the entire Jewish nation, only to cap it off with two roles that seem virtually identical in status?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that Hebrew often describes total inclusion not as a straight line, but as a circle. Hence, if you want to encompass an entire entity, you pick two adjacent points on a circle and say, “From point A all the way round to point B.” You encompass the whole perimeter.

Rav Hirsch teaches that the Jewish nation is not a rigid pyramid with leaders at the top and laborers at the bottom – it is a circle, and every single soul forms an essential part of the continuous ring.

Chassidic Masters offer an alternative explanation. Looking at this phrase through a historical lens, they suggest the Torah is referring to two specific, monumental figures in our history:

The Woodcutter refers to Avraham Avinu, of whom it is written during the *Akeida* that he chopped the wood for the offering. The Water Drawer refers to Eliyahu HaNavi, who poured gallons of water over the altar on Har Carmel to sanctify Hashem’s name.

Viewed this way, the phrase alludes to the entire span of Jewish history – from our founding patriarch, Avraham, to Eliyahu HaNavi, who will herald the ultimate Redemption.

This ties seamlessly into the verses that follow immediately after, declaring that the covenant is not only with those who stood there at the time, but also with all future generations.

The covenant of *Parshat Nitzavim* is not bounded by space or time. It belongs to every single Jew, across every generation, from the very beginning of our story until the times of our ultimate Redemption.

Shabbat Shalom!

Continued from previous page

After the Torah reading comes the *haftarah*. Every Shabbat since Tisha B’Av, we have read a *haftarah* of consolation. This Shabbat brings the final one in the

series. It speaks of joy, redemption and return to the Land of Israel, and includes this Divine promise: “For Zion’s sake I will

not be silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest.”

Shabbat Shalom, Shana Tova, and may we all be written and sealed for a good year.

Parsha Riddle



Reb Leor Broh

Mizrahi Melbourne

Find three words whose first letters hint to the first letter of the *Alef Bet*.

See page 26 for the answer to the Parsha Riddle

To Renew our Days



Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l

The moment had come. Moses was about to die. He had seen his sister Miriam and brother Aaron pre-decease him. He had prayed to G-d – not to live forever, not even to live longer, but simply, “Please let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon” (Deut. 3:25). His request was simple. Please let me complete the journey. Let me reach the destination. But G-d said no:

“It is enough!” the Lord said... “Never speak to Me about this again!”

Deut. 3:26

G-d, who had acceded to almost every other prayer Moses prayed, refused him this.¹

What then did Moses do on these last days of his life? He told the people:

“At the end of every seventh year, the year of remission, of cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your G-d at the place that He will choose, you shall read out this law in the presence of all Israel, for them to hear. Assemble the people – men, women, and children, including migrants living in your towns – so that they may listen and learn to fear the Lord your G-d and carefully keep all the words of this Law, and so that their children, who do not know it, may listen and learn to be in awe of the Lord your G-d, as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”

Deut. 31:10-13

There is no specific reference to this command in the later books of *Tanach*, but there are accounts of very similar

gatherings, covenant renewal ceremonies, in which the king or his equivalent assembled the nation, reading from the Torah or reminding the people of their history, and calling on them to reaffirm the terms of their destiny as a people in covenant with G-d.

That, in fact, is what Moses had been doing for the last month of his life. The entire book of Deuteronomy is a restatement of the covenant, almost forty years and one generation after the original covenant at Mount Sinai. There is a similar occurrence in *Tanach*, after Joshua fulfils his mandate as Moses’ successor, brings the people across the Jordan, leads them in their battles, and settles the land.² Another occurred many centuries later in the reign of King Josiah. His grandfather, Menasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years, was one of the worst of Judah’s kings, introducing various forms of idolatry including child sacrifice. Josiah sought to return the nation to its faith, ordering (among other things) the cleansing and repair of the Temple. It was during this restoration that a copy of the Torah was discovered,³ sealed in a hiding place to prevent it being destroyed during the many decades in which idolatry flourished and the Torah was almost forgotten. The king, deeply affected by this discovery, convened a *Hakhel*-type national assembly:

“Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the Temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets – all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the

covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes, and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the Covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the Covenant.”

II Kings 23:1-3

The most famous *Hakhel*-type ceremony was the national gathering convened by Ezra and Nehemiah after the second wave of returnees from Babylon (Neh. 8-10). Standing on a platform by one of the gates to the Temple, Ezra read out the Torah, after positioning Levites throughout the crowd so that they could explain to the people what was being said. The ceremony that began on Rosh Hashanah culminated after Succot when the people collectively “bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of G-d given through Moses the servant of G-d and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord” (Neh. 10:29).

The other command from our *parsha* – the last Moses gave the people – was contained in the words: ‘Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites,’ understood by rabbinic tradition to be the command to write, or at least take part in writing, a *Sefer Torah*. Why specifically these two commands, at this time?

Something profound was being transacted here. Recall that G-d had seemed brusque in His dismissal of Moses’ request to be allowed to cross the Jordan. “Enough!... Never speak to Me about this again” Is this the Torah, and this its reward? Is this how G-d repaid the greatest of the prophets? Surely not.

In these last two commands, G-d was

teaching Moses – and through him, Jews throughout the ages – what immortality is, on earth, not just in heaven. We are mortal because we are physical, and no physical organism lives forever. We grow up, we grow old, we grow frail, we die. But we are not only physical. We are also spiritual. In these last two commands, we are taught what it is to be part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years and will not die so long as there is a sun, moon, and stars.⁴

G-d showed Moses, and us, how to become part of a civilisation that never grows old. It stays young because it repeatedly renews itself. The last two commands of the Torah are about renewal: first collective, then individual.

Hakhel, the covenant renewal ceremony every seven years, ensured that the nation would regularly rededicate itself to its mission. I have often argued that there is one place in the world where this covenant renewal ceremony still takes place: the United States of America.

The concept of covenant played a decisive role in European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially in Calvin's Geneva and in Scotland, Holland, and England. Its longest-lasting impact, though, was on America, where it was taken by the early Puritan settlers and remains part of its political culture even today. Almost every Presidential Inaugural Address – every four years since 1789 – has been explicitly or implicitly a covenant renewal ceremony, a contemporary form of *Hakhel*. In 1987, speaking at the bicentennial celebration of the American Constitution, President Ronald Reagan described the constitution as a kind of “covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind... It's a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with the Supreme Being to whom our founding fathers did constantly appeal for assistance.” America's duty, he said, is “to constantly renew their covenant with humanity... to complete the work begun 200 years ago, that grand noble work that is America's par-

ticular calling – the triumph of human freedom, the triumph of human freedom under G-d.”⁵

If *Hakhel* is national renewal, the command that we should each take part in the writing of a new *Sefer Torah* is personal renewal. It was Moses' way of saying to all future generations: It is not enough for you to say, I received the Torah from my parents (or grandparents or great-grandparents). You have to take it and make it new in every generation.

One of the most striking features of Jewish life is that from Israel to Palo Alto, Jews are among the world's most enthusiastic users of information technology and have contributed disproportionately to its development (Google, Facebook, Waze). But we still write the Torah exactly as it was done thousands of years ago – by hand, with a quill, on a parchment scroll. This is not a paradox; it is a profound truth. People who carry their past with them, can build the future without fear.

Renewal is one of the hardest of human undertakings. Some years ago, I sat with the man who was about to become Prime Minister of Britain. In the course of our conversation he said, “What I most pray for is that when we get there (he meant, 10 Downing Street), I never forget why I wanted to get there.” I suspect he had in mind the famous words of Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963, who, when asked what he most feared in politics, replied, “Events, dear boy, events.”

Things happen. We are blown by passing winds, caught up in problems not of our making, and we drift. When that happens, whether to individuals, institutions, or nations, we grow old. We forget who we are and why. Eventually we are overtaken by people (or organisations or cultures) that are younger, hungrier, or more driven than us.

The only way to stay young, hungry, and driven is through periodic renewal, reminding ourselves of where we came

from, where we are going, and why. To what ideals are we committed? What journey are we called on to continue? Of what story are we a part?

How precisely timed, therefore, and how beautiful, that at the very moment when the greatest of prophets faced his own mortality, that G-d should give him, and us, the secret of immortality – not just in heaven but down here on earth. For when we keep to the terms of the covenant, and making it new again in our lives, we live on in those who come after us, whether through our children or our disciples or those we have helped or influenced. We “renew our days as of old” (Lamentations 5:21). Moses died, but what he taught, and what he sought, lives on.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE:

- Why is renewal important?
- How can remembering where we came from help us avoid losing sight of where we are going?
- Is preserving tradition enough, or does every generation have a responsibility to renew and reinterpret it?

1. There is an important lesson here: It is the prayers we pray for others, and others pray for us, that are answered; not always those we pray for ourselves. That is why when we pray for the healing of the sick or the comfort of the mourners we do so specifically “in the midst of others” who are ill or bereaved. As Judah Halevi pointed out in *The Kuzari*, the interests of individuals may conflict with one another, which is why we pray communally, seeking the collective good.
2. See chapter 24 of the Book of Joshua.
3. This is Radak and Ralbag's understanding of the event. Abarbanel finds it difficult to believe that there were no other copies of the Torah preserved even during the idolatrous periods of the nation's history and suggests that what was discovered sealed in the Temple was Moses' own Torah, written by his hand.
4. See Jeremiah 31.
5. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Ronald Reagan, 1987, 1040-43.

The Sefer Habris



Rabbi Hershel Schachter

Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University

On the last day of his life, Moshe Rabbeinu completed the writing of the original *sefer Torah*. He gave that Torah to the *kohanim* and instructed them to place it in the *kodesh ha'kodoshim* near the *luchos* which were in the *aron*. At *maamad Har Sinai* there was a national *kabbolas haTorah*, which required reading from a “*sefer ha'bris*.” Rashi (in his commentary on *Parshas Mishpatim*) quotes the *Mechilta* saying that the “*sefer ha'bris*” was the Torah from *Parshas Bereishis* until *Parshas Mishpatim*. At the end of the forty years in the *midbar*, Moshe Rabbeinu told *B'nai Yisroel* that from now on the *sefer ha'bris* consists of the entire *chamisha chumshei Torah*. The *Gemorah* (*Gittin* 60a) tells us that *kavod hatzibbur* demands that when we read *keri'as haTorah* in shul we must use a complete *sefer Torah* which includes the entire *chamisha chumshei Torah*. Although *leining* from a *klaf* that included an entire *chumash* (e.g., *Devarim*) would be considered *keri'a mitoch haksav* (as opposed to *b'al peh*), nonetheless, because the *bris* was made with the *tzibbur* on the entire Torah, whenever we *lein b'tzibbur* we require a complete *sefer ha'bris*, i.e., a *klaf* that includes the entire *chamisha chumshei Torah*.

Chazal tell us (*Shabbos* 88a) that a second national *kabbolas haTorah* took place after the occasion of *neis Purim*. The *sefer ha'bris* for that second *kabbolas haTorah* was *Megillas Esther*. The *Gemorah* (*Megillah* 19a) tells us that if you have a *Megillas Esther* written on *klaf* together with other *sifrei kisuvim*, although the reading is considered *mitoch ha'ksav*, even the *Megillas Esther* section does not have the status of *sefer ha'bris* since the other *seforim* included therein do not have the status of *sefer ha'bris*. Similarly, the Rambam¹ writes that if one combines Torah, *Nevi'im*, and *Kesuvim* on one *klaf*, since the *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim* do not have the status of *sefer ha'bris*, even

the Torah section loses its status of *sefer ha'bris*. Therefore, if a *tzibbur leins* from such a *Tanach*, although it would certainly be considered *keri'a mitoch haksav* it will constitute a violation of *kavod hatzibbur*. If one reads the *Megillah* without a *minyan* it would be perfectly acceptable to read from a *klaf* that includes other *seforim* as well; only *betzibbur*, out of *kavod hatzibbur*, do we require that the *Megillah* we read from should have the status of a *sefer ha'bris*.²

The simple reading of the *chumash* might imply that for the purpose of the *mitzvah* of *hak'hel* a special *sefer azarah* had to be used. Some *rishonim*³ state this explicitly. Some⁴ write that on *Yom Kippur* as well the special *keri'as haTorah* that the *kohein gadol* read in the *Beis ha'mikdash* had to be from the *sefer azarah*. The *Mishna* (*Sotah* 32a) tells us that although, strictly speaking, on all other occasions one may recite the *berochos* on an *aliyah* in translation, for the *keri'as haTorah* of *hak'hel* and that of the *kohein gadol* on *Yom Kippur*, the *berochos* had to be recited in the original Hebrew. These two instances of *keri'as haTorah* are clearly Biblical *mitzvos* and therefore were singled out by the *Mishna* with respect to their *berochos*.

This *Sifrei* comments on the *possuk*, “*me'ona Elokei Kedem*” (*Devarim* 33:27) that at one point there was a question regarding the reading of the word: is it “*mo'on*” or “*me'ona*”? The *Chachomim* checked into three *seforim* in the *azarah*. Two of them read “*me'ona*” and the third read “*mo'on*”, and they decided to follow the majority and established that the correct spelling of the word should be “*me'ona*”. Why didn't the *Chachomim* check all of the *sifrei Torah* in the world to establish the correct spelling? Why did they only check the three *seforim* which were in the *azarah*? Rav Soloveitchik explained that it

would appear that the *halachic* role of the *sefer azarah* is to preserve the accurate text of the *chamisha chumshei Torah*.⁵ For that reason only the three *sifrei azarah* were checked into and not all the *sifrei Torah* in the whole world. Just as the Rambam felt that the Aleppo Codex of Ben Asher was the official accurate text of the *sefer Torah* during his lifetime, the *halacha* considers the *sifrei azarah* as the official text.

The Rambam⁶ quotes from the *Tosefta* that when you have a *melech* and he has a *mitzvah* to write a second *sefer Torah*, that *sefer Torah* should be copied from the *sefer azarah*. Apparently any *sefer Torah* which is copied from the *sefer azarah* becomes itself a *sefer azarah*. It could well be that when the issue came up regarding the spelling of the word “*me'ona*” the original *sefer azarah* that was written by Moshe Rabbeinu was already in *sheimos* and the three *sifrei Torah* that they did check with were all copies of that *sefer azarah*.

This season of the year is a most auspicious time for each of us to recommit ourselves to upholding the Torah in its entirety and in a most authentic fashion, without distortions or misrepresentations. The best way to latch on to the authentic version of Torah is to become a *talmid* of one who has a *masorah* from someone else who in turn has a *masroah* etc., just as any *sefer Torah* copied from a *sefer azarah* gains the status of a *sefer azarah*, for the sake of preserving the authenticity of the Torah.

1. *Hilchos Sefer Torah*, end of Chapter 7

2. This is discussed further, at length, in *sefer Ikvei Hatzon*, chap. 23

3. Rashi and Shita Mekubetzes, *Bava Basra* 14b

4. Rashi *ibid*, and see *Tosafos* *ibid* 14a

5. See *Yalkut Shimoni* on *Parshas Vayelech*, that Moshe Rabbeinu was concerned that in the future the Torah would be distorted

6. *Hilchos Melachim*, beginning of chapter 3

Techilaso Mar, V'sofu Masuk



Rabbi Yisroel Reisman
Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshiva Torah Vodaas

As we prepare for *Shabbos Parshios Netzavim-Vayeilech*, and of course, *Selichos* on *Motzoei Shabbos*, an upcoming week of preparation for Rosh Hashana, *Aseres Yemei Teshuva*, and the *Yom Hadin*, I would like to share with you a thought on the *parsha*.

Parshas Netzavim is an incredibly diverse *parsha*. While it is a short *parsha*, the first part has some of the most difficult and strongest language of *tochacha*. We are familiar with the *tochacha* in *Bechukosai* and *Ki Savo*, but actually, the *tochacha* of *Netzavim* in many ways is much more difficult. It talks about a destruction on the scale of *Sedom V'Amora* and a destruction of the land, not only of the people. It uses very strong *leshonos*, referring to *Acharon HaDor*: “גְּפֹרִית וְקָלַח, שְׁרָפָה כָּל אֶרֶץ” (*Devarim* 29:22).

On the other hand, the second half of the *parsha* has the most beautiful words for our generation. It talks about the generation of the *Dor Ha'Acharon* and promises us that “וְשָׁב ה' אֶל-לִקְיָהוּ אֶת שְׁבוּתָךְ, וְשָׁב וְקִבְּצָךְ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים” (*Devarim* 30:3). And then, “אִם יִהְיֶה נִדְחָךְ בְּקִצָּה הַשָּׁמַיִם, מִשָּׁם” (*Devarim* 30:4). It is the only place in the Torah where HKB”H promises that He will bring *Klal Yisrael* back.

So it goes from the most difficult, really the most horrible *nevua* about what will take place in the future, to the most beautiful *nevua*. It is talking about HKB”H bending *Klal Yisrael* to His service, “וְקָלַח אֶת לִבְבְּךָ וְאָתָּה” (*Devarim* 30:6). Of course, there has got to be a lesson from the juxtaposition, the connection of the most difficult of *nevuos* in the Torah to the most beautiful.

There is a *yesod* in life in general, not only in the life of the *yachid* but in the

life of the *tzibbur*, that *Techilaso Mar, V'sofu Masuk*. A healthy life is a life where people sacrifice in the short term for benefit in the long term. In other words, any time anybody wants to accomplish something, he has got to be willing to endure some type of difficulty. If the difficulty involves spending money, exerting yourself, or even suffering *bizyonos*, you do it in order to have a great accomplishment down the road. Of course, we understand that the *Techilaso Mar* is not bitter; it is just challenging. The Torah here tells us that this is the story of *Klal Yisrael*.

This is true in regard to the entire history of the world. Adam is in *Gan Eden* and he gets thrown out. From being thrown out of *Gan Eden*, *Klal Yisrael*, the descendants of Adam HaRishon, those who choose righteousness, are able to build, *B'ezer Hashem*, to a wonderful future. The same thing with the *Dor HaMidbar*. *Techilaso Mar* – the *Dor HaMidbar* died in the *Midbar*. It was very bitter. Then *Klal Yisrael* went into the sweetness of entering *Eretz Yisrael*. The same thing: there are *churbanos* of *Bayis Rishon* and *Bayis Sheini*, and the *Bayis Shlishi* will be *masuk*.

Rav Hutner in *Pachad Yitzchok* on *Yom HaKippurim*, *Maamar Yud-Daled, Os Yud-Gimmel*, uses this *yesod* to answer a difficult *kasha* on *Sefer Shmuel*. We find that the *Ribbono Shel Olam* comes to *Shmuel HaNavi* and tells him about His disappointment with *Shaul*. As it says in *I Shmuel* 15:11, “נִחַמְתִּי כִּי הִמְלַכְתִּי אֶת שָׁאוּל” – I regret that I made *Shaul* king. Not much later, HKB”H says that *Dovid* will be *melech*. He doesn't mention him by name. He says to *Shaul*, “הֲטוֹב מִמֶּךָ” (*Shmuel I* 15:28). So *Shaul* tells HKB”H, “נִצַּח יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִשְׁקָר וְלֹא יִנָּחֵם... לֹא אָדָם” (*Shmuel I* 15:29). HKB”H doesn't do *nechama*. He doesn't change His mind.

He is not a person who regrets. What is going on? First, HKB”H says, “נִחַמְתִּי,” that He regrets giving the *malchus* to *Shaul*, and then He says, “לֹא אָדָם הוּא לְהִנָּחֵם,” that He doesn't regret?

The *yesod* of the answer is what we were saying. In *Olam HaZeh*, things work this way. They go with difficulty, they go with disappointment. Plan A does not work out, and then *B'ezer Hashem* you hope that Plan B will work out. Many people have commented that they are holding by Plan D, E, F, G. They are holding much later. It could be. Sometimes it takes a long time.

But *Kach Hi Darko Shel Olam*, that is the way the *Ribbono Shel Olam* runs His world. There was no *kerisus bris*, there was no guarantee to *Shaul* because *Shaul* was first. The guarantee was later, when it came to *Dovid*, when there was a *bris* that his descendants would continue.

The lesson, of course, is once again a familiar lesson to us: this is the way HKB”H, *kavayachol*, runs His world. He runs His world in the manner of the first attempt being a disappointment, the first attempt being difficult, being challenging, and later on the *hatzlacha* comes.

This is a *chizuk* to everybody. Everybody who has tried to be *matzliach* and saw bumps in the road – don't worry. Bumps in the road are normal. Very, very normal. I once gave a *shmuz* when I left *Ohr Somayach* about the fact that bumps in the road are normal. Later, the next summer, somebody thanked me. When I asked him, “Were there bumps on the road?” he said, “Bumps on the road? We had craters on the road.” That is the way HKB”H runs His world. You've got to hold on tight during the bumps, and you make it to the *sfo masuk*.

One Step at a Time: Returning to Hashem



Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau
Former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel

The Shabbat of *Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech* is the final Shabbat of the year. These are the final *parashot* of the year 5786 that we read. Two short *parashot* – 40 *psukim* in *Nitzavim* and 30 *psukim* in *Vayelech* – and here I was presented with a question of great weight, one whose relevance has not faded to this very day:

“I am beginning my journey back to Judaism, and naturally I am struggling with many difficulties. A rabbi showed me the verses from *Parashat Nitzavim* in order to convince me that it is easy. It says there:

‘For this commandment which I command you today is not too wondrous for you, nor is it far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it to us, so that we may hear it and do it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross the sea for us and bring it to us, so that we may hear it and do it?” Rather, the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart – to do it.’

The questioner said to me honestly: ‘I’m not convinced. I am experiencing tremendous difficulty in the process of taking the *mitzvot* upon myself. What should I do?’

I gave him the following answer: The words, **“in your mouth and in your heart, to do it,”** were said generally to every one of us, and that is true, just as everything written in the Torah is true.

It is not beyond the sea, and it is not in heaven – that is also true. It is here in this world and within our reach.

But that does not mean that it is easy. Whoever told you that it is easy has never stood the test of returning to Judaism. For someone who has been accustomed to it from early childhood, it is easier. Even for him, it is not entirely easy. But if, from the age of three, they gave him a *chalachah*, put a *kippah* and *tzitzit* on him, and began teaching him to recite *Shema Yisrael* every morning and evening; if they taught him the blessings over food – *HaMotzi*, *Shehakol*, and the others – it is easier for him. For you, it is harder. Suddenly you have to keep Shabbat. Suddenly you have to be careful to pray three times a day. Suddenly there is *kashrut*. It is very difficult.

So let us learn from Hillel. Hillel said to do it gradually. When a non-Jew came to him, as described in Tractate *Shabbat*, and said, “Convert me on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot,” Hillel did not pressure him. He did not push him. He said to him, “I have an answer for you”: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary – go and learn it.” Everything else is an explanation, an extension of this principle.

If you respect the divine image in a human being, there is hope that you will come to respect G-d Himself, by means of a *kal vachomer* argument. Because why did I tell

you, “Love your fellow as yourself,” and, by way of the negative formulation, not to do to another person what you would not want done to you? Because he, just like you, was created in the image of G-d.

So if G-d says: “Remember the *Sabbath* day, to sanctify it,” and: “You shall bind them (*tefillin*) as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes,” will you not listen to His voice? Think about what He gives you. In the morning you wake up with eyes and ears, hands and feet, a mouth and a heart and a mind. You received all of this as a gift – with no surgeries, no payments, nothing.

So what is He really asking of you? Half an hour in the morning for *Shacharit*. Fifteen minutes in the evening for *Mincha* and *Ma’ariv*. To say *Birkat HaMazon* – to give thanks for the food? “What does the Lord your G-d ask of you, except to fear Him?” It is much easier when you think about one thing in relation to the other: What do I receive from Him? A father and mother – I received from Him. A homeland, a country – I received from Him. What does He ask of me? Very, very little in comparison.

So, just as Hillel answered the person who came to convert, this is the answer of Moshe Rabbeinu to every one of us: It is not beyond the sea, and it is not in heaven. It is in your mouth and in your heart, to do it – gradually!

It Is in Our Mouths



Rabbi Shalom Rosner

Rosh Beit Midrash, Machon Lev International program

...קרוב אליך ה' בך מאד בפיך ובלבך לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ

"Rather, this matter is very close to you - it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it." (Devarim 30:14)

Among the *Rishonim*, there is a well-known debate as to whether *teshuva* constitutes an independent *mitzvah*. The Ramban, Sforno, and others maintain that it does, pointing to the verse earlier in the *parsha*: וְשָׁבָתָּ עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ - "and you shall return to Hashem your G-d" (Devarim 30:3). According to this view, the Torah not only encourages *teshuva* but commands it.

Yet the Torah goes even further. It assures us that *teshuva* is not distant or inaccessible. It is *karov eilecha me'od* - very close. It is within reach, embedded within us: "in your mouth and in your heart."

Chazal and the commentaries understand these two dimensions as defining the process of return. "*Beficha*" - in your mouth - refers to *viduy*, verbal confession, the articulation of one's failings. "*U'bilvavcha*" - in your heart - refers to the inner transformation, the resolve not to repeat past mistakes. *Teshuva* is thus both spoken and felt, expressed and internalized.

But perhaps "*beficha*" carries an additional meaning. It is not only confession, but it is also communication. It is *tefilla*.

The *Gemara* in *Eruvin* (54a) teaches: אימתי קרוב אליך? בזמן שבפיך - When is it close to you? When it is in your mouth. Closeness to Hashem is created through speech.

We understand this intuitively in human relationships. A friendship cannot survive in silence. Without regular communication, even the deepest bonds begin to weaken. Familiarity fades, connection dulls, and distance quietly takes hold.

Our relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is no different. If we seek closeness, we must speak. We must turn to Him - not only through the fixed text of *tefilla*, but through personal, honest conversation. When we are in need, we ask. When we are blessed, we give thanks. Through our words, we sustain the relationship.

A powerful story is told in *L'hitaneig B'tanugim*: A *talmid* in Poland fell gravely ill. The doctors were unable to help, and in desperation he approached his Rav, begging for guidance. The Rav told him, "Travel to the great professor in Anapole, he will surely be able to assist you."

Encouraged, the student set out immediately. But upon arriving in the small town of Anapole, he discovered something puzzling: no one had ever heard of such a professor. Confused, he pressed the locals further, until one villager finally said, "This is a small place - we have no doctors here at all." Perplexed, the student asked, "So what do you do when someone is dangerously ill?" The villager answered

simply: "We turn to the One Above - the *Rofeh Kol Basar* - and we pray."

At that moment, the student understood Rav's message. He had not been sent to a doctor. He had been sent to daven.

Teshuva, the Torah tells us, is not distant. Neither is connection. The gateway is already within us - *beficha*, in our mouths. We often search far and wide for solutions, for clarity, for healing. Yet the Torah reminds us that the most powerful tool we possess is the one we use most casually: our speech. With a few sincere words, a person can bridge the gap between heaven and earth.

As we enter times of introspection and renewal, the message is both simple and profound: speak. Speak with honesty. Speak with humility. Speak with awareness that you are standing before the *Ribono Shel Olam*. If we do, we may discover that what once felt distant is, in truth, very close - *karov eilecha me'od*. Perhaps that is the deepest comfort of all: that the path back is never beyond our reach. It is already on our lips.

Lessons of the Game



Michal Horowitz

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In this week's *parsha*, *Parshas Nitzavim*, Moshe Rabbeinu continues to lovingly encourage, exhort, rebuke and teach the people as he prepares to part ways with his beloved nation: he to his death atop Mt. Navo, they to the Promised Land under the leadership of Yehoshua.

Parshas Nitzavim, which is always read the Shabbos before Rosh HaShanah, speaks about the power of *teshuva*, repentance and return.

ושבת עד ה' אלקיך ושמעת בקלו... בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך – *And you will return to Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice, according to everything that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul (Devarim 30:2).*

ומל ה' אלקיך את לבבך ואת לבב זרעך לאהבה את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך – *And Hashem you G-d, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live (ibid, v.6).*

The Ba'al HaTurim teaches, **את לבבך ואת לבב**. The first letter of each of these four words spell the word אלול.

It is during Elul that Hashem opens our hearts, and the hearts of our children, as we come back to Him in repentance, as we return from our ways of sin, as we yearn for closeness to Him once again – to love Him with all of our heart and all of our soul, so that we may live.

If the greatest consequence of sin is the distance it puts between us and Hashem, then the greatest benefit of a life of Torah and *mitzvos* is the closeness it yields between us and our Father in heaven. *And as for me, closeness to Hashem is good (Tehillim 73:28).* As we close out the month of Elul and prepare to usher in a new year, let us contemplate the power of *teshuva*,

as we yearn and strive to close the divide between us and Hashem.

A story is told about the Rebbe, R' Nachum of Shtefenesht, the son of R' Yisrael of Rizhin (1796-1850). He once entered the *Beis Medrash* and found some of his *chassidim* playing checkers. The *chassidim* were aghast when they saw their rebbe in the doorway, and were certain that he was going to berate them for wasting their time.

To their surprise, however, a little smile played on the rebbe's lips. "Do you know the rules of the game of checkers?" he asked them.

The *chassidim* did not understand what the rebbe was alluding to, but he continued, "The rules of checkers are basically the same rules as *avodas Hashem*. Let me teach you how to play.

"Number one: In the game, you always move upward. Similarly, a servant of Hashem always has to look upward and strive to reach higher levels in his *avodas Hashem*.

"Number two: You can't jump two spaces at a time. Similarly, in *avodas Hashem*, a person can't jump more than one level at a time.

"Number three: At times it is worth giving up the opportunity to move ahead one space in order to move ahead two spaces later. Similarly, a Jew has to know that sometimes he has to withdraw in order to attain a higher level later on.

"Number four: When you reach the top of the board, your piece becomes a 'queen,' and is able to move in any direction. Similarly, when a person conquers his evil inclination and elevates himself spiritually, he is better fortified to cope with any situation."

As we return to Hashem, after a year perhaps wherein we have become sullied

with sin, let us recognize G-d's great kindness in taking us back.

And I shall be gracious to whom I shall be gracious, and I shall have mercy on whom I will show mercy (Shemos 33:19).

On this verse, the *Medrash (Shemos Rabbah 45:6)* teaches:

At that time G-d showed Moshe all the treasure houses of reward that await the righteous. Moshe said to Him, "For whom is this treasure house designated?" Hashem answered, "For those who perform *mitzvos*." "And for whom is this designated?" asked Moshe regarding another treasure house. And Hashem said, "For those who raise orphans." And so on, for each and every treasure.

Finally, Moshe beheld a vast treasure house and asked, "For whom is this designated?" And Hashem told him, "Those who have earned their reward – I give them from that which is theirs; those who have not earned any reward – I give them for free (from this vast treasure house), as it is written, *I shall be gracious to whom I shall be gracious.*"

In the merit of our always striving to move upward; advancing slowly, step-by-step, with great determination and effort; knowing when to withdraw to attain higher levels later on; and fortifying ourselves to effectively battle the *yetzer harah*, we will merit Divine gifts and closeness to Hashem. And even if, through our actions, we are not worthy, Hashem, in His great kindness and compassion, will bestow treasures upon us – His children – regardless.

May we merit a year of *yeshuos, refuos, brachos, shalom* and the ultimate redemption, may it be immediate and in our days, amen.

בברכת כתיבה וחתימה טובה ושנה טובה ומבורכת

G-d's Thirteen Middot Ha-Rachamim (Part 2)



Rabbi Menachem Leibtag

Tanach Study Center | Yeshivat Har Etzion

After the 3000 'troublemakers' are punished, Moshe begs that G-d **forgive** *Bnei Yisrael* for their sin. However, G-d seems to have rejected Moshe's eloquent request for forgiveness. Instead, G-d informs Moshe that the nation will be punished, but not immediately - rather only after Moshe will lead them to the Promised Land: "And now - go lead the people [to the Land of Israel]... **u-beyom pokdi u-pakadti...** - and on the day that I choose to punish - I will punish them for their sins."

G-d's 'negative' response to Moshe's request leaves us with the impression that indeed He will fulfill *brit avot* - thus assuring that the nation will enter the Land of Israel; however, sooner or later they will be punished for their sins.

If you carefully follow this narrative in *Chumash*, a very strange predicament has arisen (that often goes unnoticed). Even though *Bnei Yisrael* will not be destroyed, G-d instructs Moshe to continue on to *Eretz Canaan* **without** *brit Sinai*.

As unthinkable as this may sound, G-d's decision is very logical. Considering His conclusion that *Bnei Yisrael* are an '*am ksheh oref*' - a stiff-necked people, and hence will not change their ways, there appears to be no other solution. After all, should He keep His **Shchina** in their midst, *Bnei Yisrael* would not be able to survive.

Fortunately for *Am Yisrael*, Moshe Rabbeinu is not willing to accept G-d's decision. As we will see, his argument will set the stage for G-d's declaration of His **middot ha-rachamim**.

At this point, Moshe Rabbeinu intervenes: "And Moshe beseeched G-d: 'Look, you have instructed me to lead this people... but recognize that this nation is **Your** people! G-d answered: I will lead [only] you. But Moshe insisted: '*Im ein panecha holchim al ta'aleinu mi-zeh*' - Unless **Your**

presence will go with us do not make us leave this place. For how should it be known that Your people have gained Your favor unless You **go with us...**"

Moshe's refusal leaves G-d ['*kivyachol*'] in a most difficult predicament. On the one hand, He cannot allow His *Shchina* to return - for according to the terms of **brit Sinai** - an *am ksheh oref* (Am Yisrael's level) could not survive His anger, and would eventually be killed. On the other hand, He cannot leave them in the desert (as Moshe now threatens), for **brit avot** must be fulfilled! But, He cannot take them to the land, for Moshe is not willing to lead them **unless** He returns His **Shchina**. Something has to budge! But what will it be?

It is precisely here, in the resolution of this dilemma, where G-d's 13 **middot ha-rachamim** enter into the picture. Just as G-d had promised Moshe, a new covenant, reflecting this enhanced relationship, is now forged: "And G-d came down in a cloud...and passed before him and proclaimed: *Hashem, Hashem Kel rachum ve-chanun, erech apayim ve-rav chesed ve-emet, notzer chesed la-alafim...*" With this background, we can now better appreciate the Torah's choice of words that describe these *middot ha-rachamim*.

Recall the six phrases that reflected **middat ha-din** that we found in our study of **brit Sinai**. Now, as we compare them, we will notice that each **new** attribute relates directly to one of these original attributes of **din** from the first covenant. The following table (study it carefully), followed by a more detailed explanation, explains this rather amazing parallel:

FIRST LUCHOT	SECOND LUCHOT
Kel KANA	Kel RACHUM VE-CHANUN
POKED AVON.. le-sonai	POKED AVON AVOT AL BANIM..

OSEH chesed la-alafim ... LE-OHAVAI	RAV chesed ve-emet NOTZER chesed l'alafim...
LO YENAKEH	VE-NAKEH, lo yenakeh
LO YISA le-fish'eichem	NOSEI AVON VA-FESHA...
CHARON AF	ERECH APAYIM

Note how each attribute from the original covenant switches from **middat ha-din** to **middat ha-rachamim**. These striking parallels demonstrate that each of the new *middot* lies in direct contrast to G-d's *middot* in His original covenant at *Har Sinai*.

"And Moshe hastened to bow down and said: 'If I have indeed gained favor in Your eyes - **let Hashem go in our midst** - '*ki*' = **even though** they are an *am ksheh oref* - a stiff-necked people, and you shall pardon our sin...' Once these new terms are established, allowing G-d's **Shchina** to remain even though *Bnei Yisrael* may sin, Moshe begs that G-d indeed return to be with His nation. These Divine attributes of mercy now allow the *Shchina* to dwell within Yisrael even though they may not be worthy.

From a certain perspective, this entire sequence is quite understandable. For on the one hand, to be worthy of G-d's presence, man must behave perfectly. However, man is still human. Although he may strive to perfection, he may often error or at times even sin. How, then, can man ever come close to G-d? Hence, to allow mortal man the potential to continue a relationship with G-d, a new set of rules is necessary - one that includes **middot ha-rachamim**.

In this manner, *middot ha-rachamim* can be understood as G-d's kindness that allows man to approach Him and develop a closer relationship without the necessity

Continued on page 25

It Depends Only on Us



Rabbi Eli Mansour

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The Gemara in Masechet Aboda Zara (17a) tells the astonishing story of a man named Elazar Ben Dordaya, who is described as having been a degenerate addict, who visited every harlot in the world. Once, he heard of a woman who lived far away and who charged an exorbitant fee for her services, and so he took with him a pouch filled with money and traveled to her. During his visit with this woman, she told him that he is incapable of ever repenting, that he has fallen so low that he would never be able to change.

This comment rattled Elazar, who ran outside and sat in between two mountains. He begged the mountains to beseech G-d on his behalf, but they said they could not. He then begged the heavens and the earth to beseech G-d on his behalf, but they said they could not. He begged the sun, the moon and the stars, but they, too, explained that they could not pray for him. Finally, he exclaimed, "The matter depends only on me!" He lowered his head and cried, until he passed away. A heavenly voice then exclaimed, "Rabbi Elazar Ben Dordaya is granted life in the eternal world."

Not only did Elazar's repentance earn him a share in the next world, despite his life

of decadence, but it even earned him the title "Rabbi."

Elazar Ben Dordaya was not a "Rabbi" in the sense that he could answer complex halachic questions, or deliver informative and uplifting lectures. However, he is, truly, a Rabbi, a teacher for every one of us.

The Talmud elsewhere (Sukka 52a) compares the *Yeser Ha'ra*, our sinful inclinations, to a tall mountain, which is difficult to climb. When Elazar Ben Dordaya looked to the mountains for help, it means that he tried pinning the blame on his evil inclination, on his sinful impulses. When this did not work, he tried blaming the heavens and the earth – meaning, the complex combination between physicality and spirituality that characterizes the human condition. He thought he could blame his sinful lifestyle on this very difficult balance between our animalistic and spiritual natures. He then tried to blame the celestial beings – meaning, the Zodiac, his having been born at a certain time which affected his nature. Finally, he realized that he has no one to blame but himself: "The matter depends only on me."

This is why Elazar Ben Dordaya is called a "Rabbi." He teaches us the vitally important lesson that "the matter depends only on me," that we cannot blame anybody or anything for our sins. We must take

full responsibility and own up to our mistakes and failings. We will never grow or improve as long as we cast the blame for our sins on other people. We need to recognize that we are responsible for our decisions and our actions.

So often when I speak to people about religious observance, I hear them blame their low standards of observance on other factors. Some people blame it on their upbringing, saying that if their parents would have raised them differently, or had sent them to a different school, or if they had been raised in a more established Jewish community, they would observe Shabbat. Some people blame their spouse, saying that if their husband or wife was more encouraging or more passionate about religion, they would observe more. As we enter the High Holidays, we need to learn from our great "Rabbi" – Elazar Ben Dordaya. We need to learn the lesson of "the matter depends only on me," that we each have only one person to blame for our mistakes, and only one person who can help us change, and that is ourselves. This is the key to repentance – recognizing that we are fully responsible for our mistakes, and that we are fully capable of correcting them, of changing our behavior, and of becoming the people who we know we should be.



MIZRACHI



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Children of One Father



Rabbi Moshe Weinberger

Congregation Aish Kodesh, Woodmere

The *parsha* begins (*Devarim* 29:9, 11), “You are standing here today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d, your leaders, your tribes, your elders, your officers, every Jewish person.... that you may enter the covenant of Hashem your G-d.” The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh explains the nature of this covenant. He posits that it is one of interpersonal responsibility. It means that every Jew has an obligation to ensure that those with whom he wields influence keep *mitzvos* and avoid *aveiros*. Guarantorship also means that Hashem will hold us to account if we abrogate this responsibility. In saying this, the Ohr Hachaim is addressing the following implied question: Why is this covenant of interpersonal responsibility “before Hashem your G-d?” Because each Jew is responsible for another, it is more logical for the covenant to be between the members of the Jewish community, and not between the Jewish people and Hashem. Why is the covenant of guarantorship a covenant between the Jewish people and G-d?

In the *sefer Mesilas Yesharim*, Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the Ramchal, outlines one of the highest levels of human attainment, that of a *chasid*, a pious individual. Although the Ramchal lived at the same time as the Baal Shem Tov, he uses the word “*chasid*” in the classical sense, not as it would later be used to connote a specific sect within the Jewish people with distinctive clothing and customs. He explains that the *chasid* is distinct from a “regular” good Jew. A good Jew avoids sins and does *mitzvos*. But he does so in order to accumulate reward in the world to come and because he fears punishment. His primary concern is his own spiritual wellbeing, so he does whatever he can to ensure that he and his immediate family and circle of friends are doing well, but he does not concern himself with the spiritual or physical welfare of anyone outside his sphere of personal concern.

A *chasid*, on the other hand, is one who is not only motivated by his own reward and punishment. He keeps the same *mitzvos* and avoids the same *aveiros* as any other righteous Jew. But he does so not with his own wellbeing in mind, but to give pleasure and pride to the Master of the World. That is his primary motivation. The *chasid* is therefore not satisfied if he does well spiritually while others are not doing well. Because he only wants to give Hashem pleasure and satisfaction, he cannot rest while Hashem’s other children are far from who they ought to be. He knows that this causes G-d pain, so he is not indifferent to others’ spiritual state. He does whatever he can for those within his own sphere of influence to help and encourage them to draw closer to their Father in Heaven. This way, he can fulfill his true goal, to give G-d more and more satisfaction from His children.

When Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, *zy”a*, became very old, he was blind and extremely weak. During that period, he once said that if Hashem ever gave him the choice to switch places with Avraham Avinu, with all of Avraham’s merits and *mitzvos*, he would not trade. Why? Because in the end, G-d would still have one Avraham Avinu and one “Blinder Bunim, Blind Bunim.” While he would have had additional merits if he was Avraham, Reb Simcha Bunim’s only concern was whether such a trade would give anything new to Hashem. There would still only be one Avraham Avinu and only one “Blinder Bunim.” It would not create any net gain for Hashem.

We now understand the difference between the covenant in last week’s *parsha*, *parshas Ki Savo*, and the one in this week’s *parsha*. The covenant of *parshas Ki Savo* is one between each individual and G-d, where each person is responsible for himself. But the covenant of *parshas Nitzavim* is one of interpersonal responsibility.

The later covenant is also one between the Jewish people and G-d because the primary reason we take responsibility for others’ physical and spiritual wellbeing is our desire to give pleasure and satisfaction to our mutual father, the King of Kings. That is why the covenant is with “all of you... every Jewish person.” Because our main concern as Jews should not be only for ourselves, but for our Father in Heaven, we must not be indifferent to the welfare of any of His children.

This is the choice which must be foremost in our minds as we approach Rosh Hashana, when we acknowledge that Hashem will judge us “whether as children or as servants.” A servant is satisfied if he simply does the minimum necessary to receive his salary and avoid punishment by his master. The relationship is also not permanent because a master can sell or free his servant; But a child’s relationship with his father is permanent, and his main concern is not reward, punishment, or even simply doing his job. His main interest is in making his father happy. He would happily do something for his father even if he would not receive credit for it as long as it makes his father happy.

That must be our goal on Rosh Hashana. If we want Hashem to judge us like his children, then we must be loving children who are more concerned with making Hashem happy than simply checking off all of our obligations in the big checklist in the sky. That is why we read *parshas Nitzavim* just before Rosh Hashana. By doing so, we take upon ourselves the *mitzva* of guarantorship, interpersonal responsibility, to internalize the realization that all Jews are one family, part of one precious team whose goal is to coronate Hashem as King and reveal His Presence in the world.

The High Holidays as the Language of Love



Rabbi YY Jacobson
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If G-d is “perfect,” as Judaism teaches, what prompted Him to create us? What void was He seeking to fill?

One answer provided in *Kabbalah* and *Chassidus*, based on many a verse in *Tanach* and in Talmud, is that G-d desired marriage. The most accomplished and self-sufficient bachelor – and G-d is the “perfect single,” lacking nothing – can not marry himself. Marriage necessitates the existence of someone distinct from yourself with whom to share your life, a union of husband and wife. G-d chose the Jewish people as His bride. In this relationship, the bride would reveal the Divine oneness pervading the entire cosmos. What a marriage this has been – a roller coaster of romance, affection, quarrel, and estrangement. In every generation, many counselors advocated a divorce, while others proclaimed the Groom dead. Yet, the relationship has endured, because both partners know deep down, that they ultimately belong together. When all layers are removed, the human person yearns for meaning, for union with G-d, and G-d craves a relationship with us.

The high-holiday season is the annual re-experience of the marriage between G-d and His people. The five primary milestones of this season parallel the five phases of a conventional courtship and union. The holidays invite us to journey through this process again to rejuvenate the relationship.

The Hebrew month of Elul precedes the high holidays. This month is described in *Chassidic* teachings as a time when “The King goes out to the field to meet with His people, greeting them with kindness and tenderness, displaying a joyous face to all.” In our present-day slang, we would call this a date.

Just as the conventional dating process allows the two people involved to become acquainted with each other, with joy and serenity, so too the month of Elul provides us with an opportunity to get to know G-d in a genuine and profound way. G-d comes out to the field, as it were, longing to meet

you where you are, to connect with you in your natural and authentic state.

G-d, apparently, is not a fan of drawn-out dating, neither is He fearful of commitment. Four weeks later, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, He makes His proposal. “I’m crazy over you. Will you marry me?” is the question communicated to the heart of each of us as the sun sets over the horizon of the year gone by.

This is not an easy decision to make. To be married to G-d is a formidable task. It means to live with transcendence, discipline, and endless mystery. It means to challenge myself daily to go beyond my ego and insecurities, and align my posture with Divine infinity. It is the constant readiness to challenge my moral failures and to stand by the highest levels of integrity and truth. And yet, a whispering voice within persists that if we will avoid this relationship we will deny ourselves the fulfillment and happiness we are capable of achieving in our lives. We were designed to be G-dly human beings, conduits for the cosmic heart.

“Let me sleep on it,” we tell G-d.

What a night this is! The world goes haywire, says Master Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria. “During the night of Rosh Hashanah,” he writes, “the consciousness animating the universe becomes weak.” The great Jewish mystics would, in fact, feel physically weak during the night of Rosh Hashanah.

All of existence was brought into being for the sake of this marriage. If we refuse Him, the entire creation was in vain. The entire cosmos – every galaxy, every blade of grass, every grazing animal, every electron, genome, plant, and speck of dust – awaits our decision with trepidation.

On the morning of *Rosh Hashanah*, a piercing sound rises from the earth: The cry of the *shofar*. It is a simple, unsophisticated cry, expressing a person’s quintessential yearning to touch heaven.

We have decided. Our answer is, yes.

The wedding day arrives. Yom Kippur is a day described as “the time of oneness” in

which the cosmic bride and groom forge a bond for eternity.

In the Jewish tradition, the bride and groom fast on their wedding day. On the day we unite with G-d, we abstain from food or drink as well. The Talmud teaches that upon marriage, all the sins of the groom and bride are forgiven. That’s why this day is called Yom Kippur, “the day of atonement.”

The marriage ceremony begins with the stirring melody of “*Kol Nidrei*,” in which we annul our vows for the coming year. What is this all about? It is the courage we cultivate to remove the power from all those promises, vows, and addictions that tie us down, opening our neural pathways to new possibilities. During these profound moments, we attempt to free ourselves from compulsive behavior and toxic habits and let go of the traumas, pains, resentments, animosity, anger, fear, and envy that hold us hostage to dysfunction.

The traditional Jewish marriage ceremony culminates with the bride and groom entering a secluded room (“*cheder yichud*”) to spend time alone with each other. Yom Kippur as well culminates with the *Neilah*, or closure prayer. As the sun of Yom Kippur sets, the gates of heaven close – with you inside. During *Neilah*, every soul is alone with G-d. When the bride and groom exit their private room, the party begins. From Yom Kippur, we leap into the seven-day festival of Sukkot, described in the Torah as “the time of our Joy.”

These days are filled with feasting and ecstatic happiness. Every Jewish family builds a hut, a *sukkah*, outdoors, where they celebrate for seven days the marriage between G-d and His people.

We eat, drink, sing, dance, and just enjoy being one with Oneness.

The wedding feast is over. The guests and relatives have returned home. In the consummation of the relationship, bride and groom experience intimacy, their lives melded together as husband and wife.

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Nitzavim-Vayelech: As Below, So Above



Rabbi Judah Mischel

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Rebbe Meshulam Feish HaLevy Lowy of Tosh, zy'a, the exalted Tosher Rebbe, was an extraordinary holy man, a towering figure of *Avodas Hashem* and *Kedusha*. Beloved for his impeccable *midos tovos* and unconditional love for every Jew, the Rebbe founded "Kiryas Tosh," a Canadian shtetl in memory and in honor of the Hungarian city destroyed during the War.

One frigid Yom Kippur morning in the *Beis Medrash* of Kiryas Tosh, a simple, unlearned Jew, a plumber, who had joined davening for the High Holidays, left the room during Mussaf, returning a few minutes later. His hands were streaked with oil and his shirt stained with grease, but he looked very pleased. "Now it won't be freezing here anymore," he announced to the others sitting in his section. Proudly, he told them he'd gone to the boiler room to investigate why the heating wasn't working in the *Beis Medrash*, and found a problem with the old oil tank, which he then repaired, and it restarted. *Oib ess iz heis inten, s'iz heiss oiben* – "If it's hot downstairs, it will be hot upstairs," he said.

Later that night at the Rebbe's *tish* following the fast, someone told the Tosher Rebbe the unfortunate story of this Jew, who was so unlearned that he was unaware that what he had done was completely forbidden according to *halacha*.

The Rebbe looked pained, but just for a moment. His face then turned radiant, and with his signature sweetness told all of those assembled: "That he doesn't know is not his fault; he never learned! It's our obligation to help him, to teach him. But the depth of his words and his

intentions, are a message for all of us: *Oib ess iz heis inten, s'iz heiss oiben* – 'If we live with warmth down here, if we are on fire with Torah, if our davening is 'warm', then we will create warmth in *Shamayim* as well!'"



At the core of the *Selichos* liturgy, we return over and over again to the refrain of the *Yud Gimel Midos*, Hashem's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. Following the *cheit haMeraglim*, the sin of the spies, we experience Divine disappointment in our failure to believe in ourselves and Hashem's promise to deliver us into the Holy Land. Moshe pleads with Hashem to give the Jewish nation another chance: *Selach na l'avon ha'am hazeh k'godel chasdecha*, "Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this Nation according to Your great kindness." The Torah continues, *Vayomer Hashem, Salachti K'devarecha*, "And Hashem said, 'I have forgiven them in accordance with your word.'" (*Bamidbar*, 14:18-20)

A fundamental teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, zy'a, interprets a *pasuk* in *Tehillim*, *Hashem Tzilcha*, "G-d is your protective shadow" (*Tehillim* 121:5), and sheds "light" on our *Selichos* liturgy. David haMel-ech's phrase also implies that Hashem's "actions" in the world above are a reflection of our actions below. Physically, our shadow "follows us" and moves whenever we move. Thus, whatever we choose and do in this world, the *Ribbono Shel Olam*, our Shadow, "chooses" and does as well.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe, *zt'l*, (*Alei Shur*, Vol. 2) suggests an explanation why a "shadow" acts as an apt metaphor for Hashem's

protection of us. A shadow is unique in that it reflects whatever is held against the light. If our small finger is set before the light, the shadow created will be small. If our whole hand is held up, the shadow is greater. This is a way of framing Hashem's "reaction" to us in the realm of faith. To the degree that we place our whole trust and reliance in Hashem, the more Hashem will provide what we need.

Vayomer Hashem, Salachti K'devarecha.... Rashi says this means *Bishvil mah she'am-arta*, "because (as a result of) of what you said." *Selichos* helps us prepare us to stand before Hashem, with contrition and sincerity, formally addressing our missteps and shortcomings. We awaken the recognition that *Hashem Tzilecha*, "G-d is our Shadow," and is waiting to and willing to forgive us *k'dvarecha*, "according to our words of request," according to our own will to be forgiven.

As we approach the High Holidays, we can pause to consider: how much do we really believe that Hashem is hearing our words and forgiving us? How much significance and importance do we subscribe to our prayers, apology and supplications before Hashem? Are we actually willing to be forgiven and to start our lives anew?

For as the well intentioned plumber of Tosh said, *Oib ess iz heis inten, s'iz heiss oiben*, "If it's hot downstairs, it will be hot upstairs." May we believe in Hashem's fiery love for us above, and in our ability to fix and restart ourselves below.



Excerpt from Baderech: Along the Path of the Torah, forthcoming (Mosaica Press, Elul 5786)

Symbiotic Song

Mrs. Shira Smiles

International lecturer and curriculum developer

The last of the 613 *mitzvot* is to “write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel.” What song is Hashem referring to? Rashi says that this *mitzvah* refers to *Parshat Haazinu*, which immediately follows this *parsha*. Biblical song is elevating and joyous. Yet, if we look at the text of *Parshat Haazinu*, we notice that most of it is very depressing. It tells of our straying from the path Hashem has laid out for us in His Torah and the terrible tragedies that, therefore, will ensue. How is this uplifting and joyous? All the commentators agree that *Haazinu* is definitely a song. The Sefat Emet cites *Tehillim* where King David writes, “Of kindness and justice do I sing.” *Bnei Yisrael* have the capacity to see G-d’s love both in His kindnesses and in His justice, when He chastises us to bring us closer to Him.

While the Netivot Shalom agrees that most of the *shirah* is chastisement, he chooses to focus on the last few verses of *Haazinu*. There Hashem reassures us that He will avenge the blood of His servants and appease His land and His people. This is Hashem’s promise to us, that even if we are not worthy, He will never forget us. He will redeem us. This promise is a source of great encouragement throughout our history, and a powerful reason to sing.

Most of the Torah commentators, however, believe the “song” referred to here is the entire Torah. They derive from this

verse the *mitzvah* that every Jew must write his own *Sefer Torah*, a *mitzvah* that can be fulfilled by writing even one letter, as a single missing letter can invalidate the entire scroll and filling it in can make the entire scroll kosher again. How can the entire Torah be referred to as a song, especially since it is not written in poetic format? We can answer this question by examining the differences between song/poetry and prose. Haamek Davar notes that prose is generally writing that is meant to be fully understood upon its initial reading. Poetry, on the other hand, is defined by its “economy of language” and the particular elements that add shades of meaning to the lines. Each word and letter of the Torah offers greater insights into meaning, allusions, inferences, and secrets using the four basic elements (PaRDe”S) to uncover as many as 70 different interpretations of the text.

Rav Reiss uses the poetic image from *Shir Hashirim* to further explain this: “The King brought me into His chambers.” When viewed from the outside, the castle is magnificent. However, as one enters and goes from room to room, his awe grows as he encounters greater richness and beauty. So, too, it is with Torah study. During a cursory reading, one can already recognize the Torah’s splendor. However, as one delves ever more deeply into the text, one marvels at all the myriad nuances and textures that continue to be revealed.

Shirah, however, is song as well as poetry. Music can only be appreciated when the notes blend together to form a harmonious whole. Similarly, the Torah too must be appreciated as a whole more than any particular part. This is what King David meant, posits Rav Reiss, when he wrote, “The Torah of Hashem is perfect (complete); it restores the soul.” Only when the Torah is studied and observed in its entirety does it have the ability to restore one’s soul.

Rabbi I. Schwartz notes that all the *mitzvot* have one ultimate goal, to bring us closer to Hashem. This is the same reasoning that Rabbi Jacobson uses. If we were to make a list of everything we do each day it would appear to be very pedestrian. However, if we can find one uniting factor, it would add meaning to it all. We can make a conscious effort to see meaning even in eating and drinking as a means to energize us toward a meaningful life of Torah and *mitzvot*.

While Torah study and observance can be difficult at times, we can always find the strength to sing. Song is a spontaneous expression of our innermost souls. This is what Torah should be. It must become part of our very essence, as Rav Dessler teaches us. When *Bnei Yisroel* delve deeply into Torah study and give it voice, they sing the praises of Hashem and bear witness to His sovereignty over earth.

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So too, following the seven days of Sukkot, we reach the zenith of the High Holiday season: Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, described in the writings of the Arizal, the Tanya, and the Vilna Gaon as the “time of intimacy with the Divine.” During these two charged days the joy reaches its peak, as G-d and His people merge into a seamless whole. A Divine seed is planted in each of our hearts.

That’s why we recite special prayers for rain on the festival of Shemini Atzeret. What is rain? In the midst of intimacy between heaven and earth, procreative drops from

heaven are absorbed, fertilized, and nurtured by mother-earth, which in time will give birth to its botanical children. Shemini Atzeret is the day of intimacy when all new souls to be born that year are spiritually conceived.

The honeymoon comes to an end and the excitement begins to fade. Now the marriage becomes about caring for each other and demonstrating trust and loyalty, as husband and wife work through the daily grind of life. Out of the twelve months in the Jewish calendar, the only one lacking a single festive

day is the one that immediately follows the High Holiday season, the month of Cheshvan. Why? Because this is the time to build a genuine relationship with our marriage partner in our everyday lives. No fanfare or drama, just learning to find meaning and love in the daily chores of life.

This is the time to discover the joy born out of a continuous relationship with G-d, during the mundane days and nights that define the bulk of our life on planet earth. It is time to discover how ordinary moments and experiences can be extraordinary – as long as the love is flowing in your veins.

Jewish Longevity



Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi
 Popular Torah teacher and author

The world is now deeply immersed in the longevity trend, according to which age is not the most significant factor in life, but rather the way in which you live it. In other words, this approach does not claim to extend life expectancy, but rather seeks to extend the expectation itself: the sense of hope and meaning...

This new approach is as old as the Torah itself. In his final days, in the portions of *Nitzavim* and *Vayelech*, Moshe seeks to speak exclusively about the expectancy of life. Only someone whose eyes had not dimmed and whose vitality had not diminished – someone who lived the maximum number of years possible, 120 – can teach us a thing or two about the question: “What is life?”

So, according to the Torah of Moshe, what is life?

A. Life is a choice.

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... and you shall choose life, so that you and your offspring may live.”

Moshe tells his beloved people that every day will contain a little death, and every day will contain life – and we can choose between a life without expectancy and a life filled with longing and hope. Life, he says, is doing good, trusting in the good, and praying for the good.

G-d will choose for us how long we will live, but no one – not even G-d! – can choose for us how we will live: “Like a person who loves one of his sons and places his hand upon the better portion,

saying, ‘Choose this for yourself.’” (Rashi, Psalms 16:5) G-d can “place His hand,” but only we can choose.

B. Even if you cannot add years to your life, you can add life to your years.

“And the Lord your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love the Lord your G-d with all your heart... so that you may live.”

The greatest thing you can do for your life, Moshe says in his final testament, is to love what you do.

Before his death, Steve Jobs coined the phrase: “Life is short, do only what you love!” But that is a statement of privilege. A mother cannot always do only what she loves for her children. But she can always love what she does.

And once again, at the end of *Nitzavim*, Moses returns to the commandment of love as a form of longevity that extends life: “To love the Lord your G-d, to listen to His voice, and to cleave to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land...” There is life, and there is length of days. A long life is a healing life, from the same root as the biblical phrase, “and your healing shall speedily blossom.”

C. It is true that “the King desires life,” but we also need “the person who desires life.” On the 26th of Elul, this week, we will mark the anniversary of the passing of the Chafetz Chaim, the great advocate of guarding one’s speech. He was the first in history to bring to completion the idea of longevity according to which what you

release from your mouth can either bring life or bring death.

This revolutionary idea appears in *Nitzavim*: “Lest there be among you a man or a woman... whose root bears poisonous fruit and wormwood. And when he hears the words of this oath, he may bless himself in his heart, saying, ‘I will have peace, even though I follow the stubbornness of my heart...’ The Lord will not be willing to forgive him!”

What is the meaning of such harsh language?! What has this person actually done? Said something in his heart?! And for that, G-d will not be willing to forgive him? Moreover, modern longevity would ask a person to say precisely this to himself: “I will be even better off if I do exactly what I love!” Why not?

The Chafetz Chaim teaches that speech begins in the heart, and therefore every expression that comes from a place of stubborn self-will shortens one’s life expectancy. “And the later generation will say... and all the nations will say, ‘Why has the Lord done this to this land?’... And they will say, ‘Because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord...’”

So they said it! Why should we care?

Speech is our instrument for life. “Guard your tongue from evil,” because it has a direct impact on our actions: “Turn away from evil and do good.” Jewish longevity asks us to pray for it in the first days of the new year: “Remember us for life, O King who desires life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, O living G-d.”

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of immediate punishment for any transgression.

This explanation adds extra meaning to our comprehension and appreciation of our recitation of the *Selichot*. Reciting the 13 **middot** comprises more than just a mystical formula. It is a constant reminder of the **conditions** of the covenant of the **second luchot**. G-d’s attributes of mercy, as we have shown, do not

guarantee automatic forgiveness; rather, they **enable the possibility** of forgiveness. As the *pasuk* stated, G-d will forgive only he whom He chooses. To be worthy of that mercy, the individual must prove his sincerity to G-d, while accepting upon himself not to repeat his bad ways.

Thus, our recitation of the 13 *middot* serves as a double reminder:

1) Not to ‘give up’ in our strive towards holiness, for indeed *middot ha-rachamim* allow us to come close. Yet, at the same time:

2) To recognize that Divine mercy is **not** automatic.

This recognition should inspire one who understands the terms of this covenant to act in a manner by which G-d will find him worthy of Divine mercy.

Hebrew Language in the Parsha



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In the *haftara* for Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelekh, Jerusalem is described as a city watched over day and night:

על־חומתֶיךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם הַפְקֹדֶתִי
שְׁמָרִים כָּל־הַיּוֹם וְכָל־הַלַּיְלָה

“On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have stationed watchmen, through the day and through the night.” (*Yeshayahu* 62:6)

In this verse, watchmen stand on Jerusalem’s *חומה* – walls – because the walls are the outer defense of a city. The noun *חומה* usually refers to that kind of wall, not the wall of a house or an ordinary building, and in this setting it presents Jerusalem as an enclosed and protected city rather than just a collection of homes.

Some scholars connect *חומה* to the root *חמה*, “to see, protect,” which fits the verse well. The same root is common in Aramaic and appears in the declaration made before Pesach, *דחמיתא*, ... כל חמירא ... דלא חמיתא, “any *chametz* ... that I saw or

did not see.” In that approach, a *חומה* is not only a barrier but a wall defined by guarding, the place one watches from.

The word *קיר* points in a different direction. In Modern Hebrew it became the ordinary word for “wall,” especially the wall of a room, a house, or another structure, and scholars have linked it either with *קורה*, “beam,” or with words connected to asphalt or coating.

That contrast – *חומה* as a defensive perimeter, *קיר* as a structural surface – helps explain a puzzling detail in *Yehoshua* 2:15:

וַתּוֹרֶדְם... בְּעֵד הַחֲלוֹן כִּי בֵיתָהּ בְּקִיר הַחוֹמָה וּבַחוֹמָה
הִיא יוֹשֶׁבֶת.

Rachav lowered the spies from her window because her house is built into the city wall itself – *בְּקִיר הַחוֹמָה*. Translators have handled the phrase differently. Some render it as “her dwelling was at the outer side of the city wall ... and she lived in the actual wall,” taking *קיר* as the

outer face or surface of the fortification and *חומה* as the defensive structure as a whole. Others translate more simply: “her house was in a wall of the fortification, and she lived in the fortification,” keeping *קיר* as “wall” and reading the two words together as a unit. A third approach notes that houses were sometimes built into city walls as a way of saving materials, so that a dwelling could share one of its walls with the larger defensive structure.

A third Hebrew word for wall, *כּוֹתֵל*, is narrower than either of the other two. It appears only once in the Bible, in *Shir Hashirim* 2:9, and scholars connect it – through the Aramaic *כּוֹתֵלָא* – with an Akkadian term meaning “back side,” which suits the sense of a side wall or rear wall. In Rabbinic Hebrew *כּוֹתֵל* became common, but in Modern Hebrew it is largely reserved for one particular wall: *הַכּוֹתֵל הַמַּעֲרָבִי*, the Western Wall of the Temple Mount.

Answer to the Parsha Riddle (from page 11)

“אֲשֶׁר לָבּוֹ פִּנָּה” – whose heart goes astray“
These words have their initial letters the name of the first letter of the *alef* bet, namely *א*.

They appear in the following verse (29:17):

פְּנִי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכֶם אִישׁ אוֹ-אִשָּׁה אוֹ מִשְׁפָּחָה אוֹ-שִׁבְט
אֲשֶׁר לָבּוֹ פִּנָּה הַיּוֹם מֵעַם הָאֵל-קִינוּ לְלַכֵּת לַעֲבֹד
אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי הַגּוֹיִם הָהֵם...

Lest there be amongst you a man or woman or family or tribe whose heart strays from Hashem our G-d to serve the gods of these nations...

The Chida quoting **Rabbenu Efrayim** suggests that the “*alef*,” which can also mean one thousand, hints to the Torah that was given after 1,000 generations (the last 26 of these were after Creation, 10 between Adam and Noach, another 10 between Noach and Avraham, then a further six to Moshe Rabbenu).

The message is, that a person who strays after idolatry is considered to have forsaken the entire Torah that was given after *דור א*.

The Chida himself gives an explanation based on a *Midrash* that originally the first letter of the *Alef Bet* was to be spelt with just two letters *אף* which means anger.

But when Hashem saw that the world would not withstand the brunt of His anger, He inserted a “*lamed*” to cancel the anger.

The verse here in *Nitzavim* talks about someone who wishes to stray from Hashem. He does so with the thought that Hashem’s anger is now cancelled.

So his heart strays, *פִּנָּה*, because he relies on the *alef* spelt in a way that removes all anger.

However the verses continue to describe how Hashem will not forgive the man, who has abused His kindness by relying on the *alef*.

Hashem’s anger will glow against the man and the “*lamed*” will be removed, as the next verses go on to say:

“כִּי אֲזִי יַעֲשֶׂן אֶת־הָיָה וְקִנְאָתוֹ בְּאִישׁ הַהוּא” – for then the anger of Hashem and his zealotry will rage against that man.

The word *אף* is intentionally used here as if to say, Hashem will reinstate the *alef* for that person to be spelt without the “*lamed*.”

As we approach Shabbat Shuvah and Yom Kippur, may we merit to have Hashem cancel any anger towards us, showing us only *rachamim* and grant all of *Klal Yisrael* a *Gmar Chatima Tova*!



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Mechinat Ruach HaNegev

LATVIA

JURMALA

Jewrmala - the Jurmala Jewish Community

MALTA

Jewish Community

MEXICO

Mizrachi México

NORTH MACEDONIA

SCOPIA

Jewish Community

PANAMA

Centro comunitario BETH EL

POLAND

Chief Rabbinate of Poland

PORTUGAL

PORTO

Rabbi Daniel Litvak

SCOTLAND

EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation

SERBIA

BELGRADE

Rav Isak Asiel

SOUTH AFRICA

JOHANNESBURG

Mizrachi Glenhazel Shul

SWEDEN

The Jewish Community of Stockholm
Kehilat Adat Yeshurun
Kehiliat Adat Yisrael

SWITZERLAND

BERN

Jüdische Gemeinde Bern

ZURICH

HaKehila HaYehudit Zurich
HaKehila HaYehudit Lausanne
Mizrachi
Wollishofen

TANZANIA

ARUSHA

Bayit Knesset Shalem Al Shabazi

UNITED KINGDOM

Mizrachi UK

UNITED STATES

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Kol Hatorah Kulah
National Council of Young Israel
RZA-Mizrachi USA

CALIFORNIA

Beth Jacob Congregation
Harkham Hillel Hebrew Academy
West Coast Torah Center
Young Israel of North Beverly Hills
YULA High School
Young Israel of Century City

COLORADO

DAT Minyan
East Denver Orthodox Synagogue
The Denver Kehillah

CONNECTICUT

Beth David Synagogue
Congregation Agudath Sholom
Young Israel of West Hartford

FLORIDA

Beth Israel Congregation
Hebrew Academy RASG
PlayHard PrayHard
Congregation Torah Ohr
Sha'arei Bina Torah Academy for Girls
Young Israel of Hollywood-Ft. Lauderdale

GEORGIA

Congregation Beth Jacob
Congregation Ohr HaTorah

HAWAII

Kehilat Olam Ejad Ganim

ILLINOIS

Mizrachi-Religious Zionists of Chicago

MARYLAND

Kemp Mill Synagogue
Pikesville Jewish Congregation

Bnai Jacob Shaarei Zion Congregation

MASSACHUSETTS

Congregation Beth El Atereth Israel
Congregation Kadimah-Toras Moshe
Congregation Shaarei Tefillah
Young Israel of Brookline

MICHIGAN

Young Israel of Oak Park
Young Israel of Southfield
Congregation Kadimah-Toras Moshe

MINNESOTA

Congregation Darchei Noam

MISSOURI

Yeshivat Kadimah High School Nusach
Hari B'nai Zion Congregation
Young Israel of St. Louis

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Hillel at Dartmouth

NEW JERSEY

Ahavas Achim
Volunteer Chaplain Middlesex County
Congregation AABJ&D
Congregation Adath Israel of the JEC
National Council of Young Israel
Congregation Ahavat Achim
Congregation Ahavath Torah
Congregation Brothers of Israel
Congregation Darchei Noam of Fair Lawn
Congregation Etz Chaim of Livingston
Congregation Israel of Springfield
Congregation Ohr Torah
Congregation Sons of Israel of Cherry Hill
Kehilat Keshet
Ma Tov Day Camp
Ohav Emeth
Pal Foundation
Shomrei Torah of Fair Lawn
Synagogue of the Suburban Torah Center
Yavneh Academy
National Council of Young Israel
Young Israel of Teaneck

NEW YORK

Beis Community
Congregation Anshei Shalom
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Congregation Bais Tefilah of Woodmere
Congregation Beth Sholom
Ramaz
Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls
MTA – Yeshiva University High School for Boys
Young Israel of Merrick
Congregation Beth Torah
Congregation Etz Chaim of Kew Gardens Hills
Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun
Congregation Ohav Zedek
Great Neck Synagogue
Iranian Jewish Center/Beth Hadassah Synagogue
Irving Place Minyan

Jewish Center of Atlantic Beach

Kehilath Jershurun
Kingsway Jewish Center
Lincoln Square Synagogue
Merkaz Yisrael of Marine Park
North Shore Hebrew Academy
Young Israel of Merrick
NYC Department of Correction
OU-JLIC at Binghamton University
OU-JLIC at Cornell University
Queens Jewish Center
Stars of Israel Academy
The Jewish Center
The Riverdale Minyan
Vaad of Chevra Kadisha
West Side Institutional Synagogue
Yeshiva University High School for Girls
Young Israel of Hillcrest
Young Israel of Jamaica Estates
Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst
Young Israel of Long Beach
Young Israel of New Rochelle
Young Israel of North Woodmere
Young Israel of Oceanside
Young Israel of Scarsdale
Young Israel of Woodmere

OHIO

Beachwood Kehilla
Congregation Sha'arei Torah
Congregation Torat Emet
Green Road Synagogue
Fuchs Mizrachi School
Heights Jewish Center

PENNSYLVANIA

Shaare Torah Congregation

SOUTH CAROLINA

Brith Sholom Beth Israel
Congregation Dor Tikvah

TENNESSEE

Baron Hirsch Congregation

TEXAS

Mayerland Minyan Synagogue
Robert M. Beren Academy
United Orthodox Synagogues of Houston

VIRGINIA

Keneseth Beth Israel

WASHINGTON

Bikur Cholim-Machzikay Hadath
Northwest Yeshiva High School
Sephardic Bikur Holim Congregation

URUGUAY

Comunidad Yavne Uruguay

VENEZUELA

CARACAS

Ashkenazi Kehilla
Mizrachi Venezuela



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