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subject: Shabbat Shalom from the OU

The Courage not to Conform Britain's Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Never was this more dramatically signalled than in the first words of God to Abraham, the words that set Jewish history in motion: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you."

Why? Because people do conform. They adopt the standards and absorb the culture of the time and place in which they live – "your land." At a deeper level they are influenced by friends and neighbours – "your birthplace." More deeply still they are shaped by their parents and the family in which they grew up – "your father's house."

I want you, says God to Abraham, to be different. Not for the sake of being different, but for the sake of starting something new: a religion that will not worship power and the symbols of power – for that is what idols really were and are. I want you, said God, to "teach your children and your household afterward to follow the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just."

To be a Jew is to be willing to challenge the prevailing consensus when, as so often happens, nations slip into worshipping the old gods. They did so in Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. That was the age of nationalism: the pursuit of power in the name of the nation-state that led to two world wars and tens of millions

of deaths. It is the age we are living in now as North Korea acquires and Iran pursues nuclear weapons so that they can impose their ambitions by force. It is what is happening today throughout much of the Middle East and Africa as nations descend into violence and what Hobbes called "the war of every man against every man."

We make a mistake when we think of idols in terms of their physical appearance – statues, figurines, icons. In that sense they belong to ancient times we have long outgrown. Instead, the right way to think of idols is in terms of what they represent. They symbolise power. That is what Ra was for the Egyptians, Baal for the Canaanites, Chemosh for the Moabites, Zeus for the Greeks, and missiles and bombs for terrorists and rogue states today.

Power allows us to rule over others without their consent. As the Greek historian Thucydides put it: "The strong do what they wish and the weak suffer what they must." Judaism is a sustained critique of power. That is the conclusion I have reached after a lifetime of studying our sacred texts. It is about how a nation can be formed on the basis of shared commitment and collective responsibility. It is about how to construct a society that honours the human person as the image and likeness of God. It is about a vision, never fully realised but never abandoned, of a world based on justice and compassion, in which "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11: 9).

Abraham is without doubt the most influential person who ever lived. Today he is claimed as the spiritual ancestor of 2.4 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims and 13 million Jews, more than half the people alive today. Yet he ruled no empire, commanded no great army, performed no miracles and proclaimed no prophecy. He is the supreme example in all of history of influence without power.

Why? Because he was prepared to be different. As the sages say, he was called ha-ivri, "the Hebrew," because "all the world was on one side (be-ever echad) and he was on the other" (Genesis Rabbah 42: 8). Leadership, as every leader knows, can be lonely. Yet you continue to do what you have to do because you know that the majority is not always right and conventional wisdom is not always wise. Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Abraham. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age.

After the Holocaust some social scientists were haunted by the question of why so many people were prepared, whether by active participation or silent consent, to go along with a regime that they knew was committing one of the great crimes against humanity.

One key experiment was conducted by Solomon Asch. He assembled a group of people, asking them to perform a series of simple cognitive tasks. They were shown two cards, one with a line on it, the other with three lines of different lengths, and asked which was the same size as the line on the first. Unbeknown to one participant, all the others had been briefed by Asch to give the right answer for the first few cards, then the wrong one for most of the rest. On a significant number of occasions the experimental subject gave an answer he could see was the wrong, because everyone else had done so. Such is the power of the pressure to conform that it can lead us to say what we know is untrue.

More frightening still was the Stanford experiment carried out in the early 1970s by Philip Zimbardo. The participants were randomly assigned roles as guards or prisoners in a mock prison. Within days the students cast as guards were behaving abusively, some of them subjecting the "prisoners" to psychological torture. The students cast as prisoners put up with this passively, even siding with the guards against those who resisted. The experiment was called off after six days, during which time even Zimbardo found himself drawn in to the artificial reality he had created. The pressure to conform to assigned roles is strong enough to lead people into doing what they know is wrong.

That is why Abraham, at the start of his mission, was told to leave "his

land, his birthplace and his father's house," to free himself from the pressure to conform. Leaders must be prepared not to follow the consensus. One of the great writers on leadership, Warren Bennis (in his book *On becoming a leader*, Basic Books, 1989, 49), writes: "By the time we reach puberty, the world has shaped us to a greater extent than we realise. Our family, friends, and society in general have told us – by word and example – how to be. But people begin to become leaders at that moment when they decide for themselves how to be."

One reason why Jews have become, out of all proportion to their numbers, leaders in almost every sphere of human endeavour, is precisely this willingness to be different. Throughout the centuries Jews have been the most striking example of a group that refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith. One other finding of Solomon Asch is worth noting. If just one other person was willing to support the individual who could see that the others were giving the wrong answer, it gave him the strength to stand out against the consensus. That is why, however small their numbers, Jews created communities. It is hard to lead alone, far less hard to lead in the company of others even if you are a minority.

Judaism is the countervoice in the conversation of humankind. As Jews we do not follow the majority merely because it is the majority. In age after age, century after century, Jews were prepared to do what the poet Robert Frost immortalised in *The Road Not Taken*, *Birches*, and *Other Poems*:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

It is what makes a nation of leaders.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is a global religious leader, philosopher, the author of more than 25 books, and moral voice for our time. Until 1st September 2013 he served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, having held the position for 22 years. To read more from Rabbi Sacks or to subscribe to his mailing list, please visit www.rabbisacks.org.

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Rabbi Mordechai Willig - The Vision of Ovadia

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Rabbi Mordechai Willig **The Vision of Ovadia**

Our founding father, Avraham Avinu, came from Bavel (Bereishis 11:27,28). Ibn Ezra states that he was born there (Ramban disagrees), and it was known as Kasdim or Shinar (ibid.) He came to Eretz Yisrael, went briefly to Egypt, returned and lived a long and productive life, and established a large and eternal dynasty (12:1,2,10;13:1;15:5,15;17:4-8).

Harav Ovadia Yosef zt"l traveled in Avraham Avinu's footsteps. Born in Baghdad (Bavel, present-day Iraq) he came to Eretz Yisrael. With his outstanding diligence and phenomenal memory, he achieved an incomparable breadth of Torah knowledge. He served briefly as a rav in Egypt, returned to Eretz Yisrael, and lived a long and productive life.

His meteoric career as a rabbinical judge and chief rabbi was accompanied by a prolific output of responsa. His ten volume *Yabia Omer*, a classic in its author's lifetime, is written in the style of Sefardic *gedolim* taken to an unprecedented level.

As his first work, *Chazon Ovadia*, implies, he was a man of bold vision. His lifetime goal was to restore the glory of the Sefardic heritage, "L'hachzir atara l'yoshna - to return the crown to its original state." He advocated a return to the rulings of R. Yosef Karo, the 16th century author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, whom he viewed as the authority for Eretz Yisrael, particularly for its Sefardic residence. Notwithstanding powerful opposition from great Sefardic rabbis (see *Mimaran Ad Maran* by Rabbi B. Lau), his eminent position and his peerless scholarship enabled him to prevail.

However, his vision extended beyond the *beis din* and *beis midrash*. He founded *Shas*, a political party, to restore Torah, pride, and power to the masses of traditional Sefardim, most of whom were not fully observant. Despite the inherent difficulties and challenges of the political arena, he pursued his goal relentlessly, and achieved major success, affecting all of Eretz Yisrael and beyond.

He established a family dynasty; his sons all occupy prominent positions in the Sefardic Torah establishment, including the recently elected Chief Rabbi. His sons in law served as prominent rabbinical judges in the chief rabbinate system. Yet, like Avraham Avinu, he was not only the ancestor of a biological dynasty, but also made many souls, inspiring many to enter under the wings of the Divine Presence (12:5, Rashi).

He commanded the respect of all, and the fierce loyalty of his followers. His homilies, in the Sefardic tradition of sharp expression, which has precedent in *Sefer Ovadia*, were broadcast to mass audiences who delighted in their content and style, notwithstanding the equally sharp critiques of those unaccustomed to his style and/or opposed to his message.

His halachic decisions were popularized by his sons and others, and have become the final word in many Sefardic circles. They enjoy mass circulation and translation. Rav Ovadia formed strong alliances with many Ashkenazi rabbanim, *roshei yeshiva*, and Chassidic leaders and courts. Despite differences in halachic decisions, approach to learning, and political issues, they recognized his greatness and uniqueness.

Avraham was known as *ha'Ivri* (14:13), since he came from across the river (Rashi). He left his homeland and had continuing faith in Hashem (12:4, 15:6), which he relied upon when opposing powerful foes (*Be'er Basadeh*, cited in Saperstein edition). Avraham was willing to stand alone, on one side, even if the entire world was on the other side (*Bereishis Raba* 42:8).

Rav Ovadia, like Avraham Avinu, had great faith in Hashem, His Torah and His People. He was unafraid to take bold halachic positions, even if nearly all others disagreed, especially when his *psak* would help individuals in halachic distress.

His funeral, perhaps unprecedented in its size, demonstrated the reverence and esteem this great scholar and leader enjoyed and deserved. May his example of learning and teaching Torah and service to Klal Yisrael inspire all of us, children of Avraham Avinu, who have benefited from the inestimable lifetime achievements of Harav Ovadia Yosef.

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Rabbi Frand on Parshas Lech Lecha

Rabbi Yissocher Frand ryfrand@torah.org

Parshas Lech Lecha These *divrei Torah* were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #830, Standing for a Chosen. Good Shabbos! Never Miss Subscription Series

The Landlord Is Still Home

Avraham Avinu returns victorious from the battle with the Four Kings and is greeted by the rescued King of Sodom who tells him "Give me the souls and you take the spoils of war." Avraham takes an oath that he will take not even a shoelace from the King of Sodom so that the King would not later be able to say "I made Avraham wealthy." [Bereishis 14:22-23] This booty rightfully belonged to Avraham but he did not want to take it. The *Medrash* in *Bereishis Rabbah* comments on this refusal to take even a shoelace: "For this noble act, Avraham merited that his children receive a *mitzvah*." What was this *mitzvah*? The *Medrash* actually lists several *mitzvos* that Avraham's children merited because of this act, among them the *mitzvah* of *Aliyah L'Regel* -- coming up to Jerusalem for the Festivals. This is alluded to by the *pasuk*: "Mah Yafu p'amayich bas nadiv" [Shir HaShirim 7:2]. This *pasuk* extols the virtues of the footsteps

of Klal Yisrael. The question we need to analyze in light of this Medrash is what is the connection between Avraham Avinu and the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel? More specifically, how does the proclamation of Avraham to the King of Sodom regarding his refusal to take the spoils of war lead to his children meriting the privilege of having the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel?

In order to answer these questions, we need to spend a few moments analyzing the mitzvah. The pasuk says, "Three times during the year, each male from amongst you should be seen before the L-rd your G-d." [Shmos 23:17] The three times a year that Jews have to leave their homes and travel to Jerusalem are the holidays of Pessach, Shavuos, and Succos. When one thinks about it, this obligation could not come at a worse time for the average Jewish household. It is equivalent to saying "in March and April, all accountants have to go up to Jerusalem." [Yearly income tax is due April 15 in the United States.] It is the middle of tax season, you do not know how you are going to finish all your work, but you have to drop everything and travel up to Jerusalem at the worst possible time.

That is the way it was for the farmer in the agrarian society. We celebrate Pessach during the planting season, in the month of Nissan, I need to leave the farm and travel to Jerusalem. Shavuos occurs during the harvest season. Again, the worst time in the world for a farmer to have to take a forced trip and leave his farm -- together with all the hired help -- right in the middle of the crop harvest! Finally, the real test comes on Succos -- the time of the in-gathering of the crop -- I need to bring the crop into the barns and silos before the winter rains begin. Again I need to drop everything and run to Yerushalayim.

It is no coincidence that at these times it is necessary to go up to the Beis HaMikdash. On these occasions -- especially when a person is busy with the harvest -- it is very easy for a person to fall into the trap of "My strength and the power of my hand made me all this wealth" [Devorim 8:17] -- Boy am I a good farmer! Look at this crop! I am going to make a fortune! Therefore, at this very time, the Almighty tells us, "Go to Jerusalem and go to the Beis HaMikdash and get your priorities straight. Realize that 'my strength and the power of my hand made me all this wealth', is not correct, but rather, 'He who gives you the strength to prosper' [Devorim 8:18]". This is one of the lessons we need to learn when we go up to Jerusalem at the time of the Festivals.

However, there is something even more acute than that. The Torah uses the expression -- Adon [Master] -- by Aliyah L'Regel. "Three times during the year, all your males should be seen before the Master, Hashem." [Shmos 23:17] Hashem is rarely referred to as "Adon" in the Torah. "Adon" is simply not one of the more common names used to refer to Hashem in the Torah. Again, by Aliyah K'Regel in Parshas Ki Sisa, the pasuk says "before the Master, the G-d of Israel." [Shmos 34:23] So by Aliyah L'Regel it is emphasized twice. This teaches a second lesson that we must learn from the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel. The mitzvah reminds us "Who is the Master?" "Who is the 'Baal-Habayis' of the world? "Who owns everything?" The 'Baal-Habayis' is the Hashem. The nuance of the word 'Adon' means He is the Master, He is the 'Baal-Habayis'.

To wit, the Yalkut Shimoni writes that anytime the Torah uses the expression 'Adon' the connotation is "He can take out the existing tenants and he can put in new tenants". He is the "Baal Ha-bayis". In English, we would say "He is the landlord!" That is why the Torah uses this expression concerning the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel.

Every Jew who owned the smallest piece of land, leaves everything and goes up to Yerushalayim. Is this not a security risk? Is this not an invitation for disaster? Who will be watching the sheep, the cattle, the farm, the house? Everyone left town! The Jewish people rarely if ever lived in entirely tranquil times. What would stop the enemy from coming in and taking over? Imagine what would happen today if everyone left their homes to travel to Jerusalem. It would be an open invitation to our

enemies to invade and take over the country, Heaven forbid.

How can we do that? We can do it because the Ribono Shel Olam says, "the 'Baal haBayis' is still home". The Landlord remains on guard! "I promise you," the Landlord says, that "no man shall covet your land when you go up to see the Presence of the L-rd your G-d three times a year" [Shmos 34:24]. I promise you that no ill will befall you when you perform this mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel. This is the message that is reinforced by this three times a year commandment: Do not ever forget who is in charge.

The Medrash in Shir HaShirim tells the story of two wealthy brothers in Ashkelon who had wicked Gentile neighbors. The neighbors plotted to loot the property of the brothers when they traveled up to Jerusalem. The brothers left on their Aliyah L'Regel journey, and the neighbors scouted out the property -- expecting it to be unoccupied -- but they saw two people still there, going in and out, in and out. They continued checking throughout the holiday and to their amazement, each day the brothers still appeared to be on their land. Lo and behold after the Yom Tov was over, the brothers returned from Jerusalem and they brought their neighbors back souvenirs from the Holy City.

The neighbors questioned the brothers: Where were you? They said, "We were in Jerusalem." The neighbors were incredulous. "What do you mean, we saw you each day. You were here the whole time!" The brothers assured them that they just gotten back from a two week journey to Jerusalem. The Medrash concludes that the Gentile neighbors recognized the miracle and responded, "Blessed be the G-d of Israel who does not abandon them and does not leave them orphaned." It was a miracle. The Almighty made two angels appear who looked like the two brothers. Nothing happened to their house because "No man will covet your land". G-d says, "I am the Landlord and the Landlord is still home."

The Medrash relates a similar incident. The brothers left the door unlocked, a snake came and wrapped himself around the padlock so that the Gentiles could not enter. There are several such incidents in the Medrash. The points are all the same: There is a Ribono shel Olam who is in charge and who is the landlord. He brings tenants in and he kicks tenants out. He is the One who provides sustenance. He can protect us. He will protect us. This is the lesson of Aliyah L'Regel.

When Avraham Avinu came back from battle, the King of Sodom told him: "Give me the souls; you take the booty." What does Avraham Avinu say? "I lift my hand to the G-d on High, who owns Heaven and Earth (koneh shamayim v'aretz)..." This expression "koneh shamayim v'aretz" is an expression we say daily in the Shmoneh Esrei in reference to Hashem. It connotes that he is the Landlord -- he owns everything! Avraham will not accept a shoelace from the King of Sodom because he knows that it is the L-rd who owns Heaven and Earth who has promised to give him wealth. Avraham is confident that it will be He who will give him wealth and does not want to give the King of Sodom the opportunity to say "I made Avraham wealthy."

This was Avraham's signature message to the world: There is One G-d, a personal G-d, an interested G-d, a G-d who runs the show and who is the Baal HaBira (the Master of the Metropolis). This is the same Avraham Avinu in whose merit his children received the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel, which for all future generations would teach Avraham's offspring this very same message.

It is no coincidence that the Gemara says, [Brochos 7b] "Rav Yochanan stated in the name of Rav Shimon bar Yochai: "From the day the Holy One Blessed be He created the world, there was no person who called Him 'Adon' until Avraham came and did so." Others recognized the Holy One Blessed be He. Adam recognized Him, Noach recognized Him, Shem recognized Him. But Avraham was the first one to recognize him as the 'Adon', the Landlord, owner of everything that exists and all that happens in the world. Therefore, it was he who merited for his children the commandment of Aliyah L'Regel.

Once before, I mentioned that a person wrote a commentary on the

Siddur, the Jewish prayer book, and brought it to the Gaon of Vilna for an approbation. The Vilna Gaon opened it to the first page and saw the first insight of the author -- on the Adon Olam prayer. The author asked, "Why does the morning service begin with the Adon Olam prayer?" The answer is because Avraham Avinu was the first person to call the Almighty by the name Adon and the morning service was enacted corresponding to Avraham's practice to recite the morning prayer. The Gaon commented that for this insight alone, the rest of the commentary was worth buying.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for this Parsha are provided below: To Support Project Genesis- Torah.org Transcribed by David Twersky Seattle, WA; Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman, Baltimore, MD RavFrand, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Yissocher Frand and Torah.org. Join the Jewish Learning Revolution! Torah.org: The Judaism Site brings this and a host of other classes to you every week. Visit <http://torah.org> or email learn@torah.org to get your own free copy of this mailing. Need to change or stop your subscription? Please visit our subscription center, <http://torah.org/subscribe/> -- see the links on that page. Permission is granted to redistribute, but please give proper attribution and copyright to the author and Torah.org. Both the author and Torah.org reserve certain rights. Email copyrights@torah.org for full information. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 122 Slade Avenue, Suite 250 Baltimore, MD 21208 <http://www.torah.org/> learn@torah.org (410) 602-1350

[Parshapotpourri] Parsha Potpourri by Rabbi Oizer Alport - Parshas Lech Lecha Shema Yisrael Torah Network

to **Potpourri** Parshas Lech Lecha - Vol. 9, Issue 3

Compiled by **Rabbi Oizer Alport**

Vayehi ka'asher hikriv la'vo Mitzraymah vayomer el Sarai ishto hinei na yadati ki isha yefas mareh at (12:11) Due to a famine in the land of Canaan, Avrohom and Sorah decided to travel to Egypt. As they approached the border between the two countries, Avrohom became aware of Sorah's beauty and began to fear that the Egyptians would want to marry her and would kill him in order to do so. Why did he suddenly become aware of her beauty at this time?

Rashi explains that due to their tremendous modesty, Avrohom had never looked at her and was unaware of her attractive appearance. At this time, something occurred which caused him to look at her for the first time, and he recognized her beauty. Why does the Torah emphasize the seemingly irrelevant geographical fact that this occurred as they drew close to Egypt, and as there are no coincidences in even the most minute details of events, why did Hashem cause this to occur at this time?

Although we are unable to relate to it, Avrohom was on such a high level in spirituality and modesty that he felt it appropriate to be married solely for the sake of Heaven and not to even look at his wife, a practice which he successfully upheld for decades. The Noda BiYehuda notes that this is even more remarkable in light of the teaching of the Gemora in Megillah (15a) that Sorah was one of the four most beautiful women in the history of the world, a reputation of which he was surely aware, and yet with tremendous self-control elected not to have any benefit from.

The Rambam writes (Hilchos Deios 6:1) that a person is naturally influenced by his surroundings. The Egyptians were a nation more immoral and depraved than any other, excelling in their passion for illicit relationships (Rashi Vayikra 18:3). Rav Moshe Wolfson explains that as Avrohom approached the Egyptian border - even before he crossed it - he was negatively influenced by the immorality which permeated the very air of Egypt, which caused him to fall from his great heights of personal modesty, and for the first time he glanced at his wife's beauty.

The recognition of the effect one's surroundings can have on even the greatest of men should serve as a lesson for us, who have much farther to fall, about the importance of dwelling and spending our leisure time in environments which are conducive to Torah values.

Vayomer Ado-nai Hashem ba'eh eid'ah ki irashena (15:8) The Gemora in Berachos (7b) derives from our verse that Avrohom was the first person in history to call Hashem Adon - Master. The author of a new commentary on the Siddur brought his manuscript to the Vilna Gaon to receive his comments and to request a letter of approbation. The Gaon began to examine the work and noticed an original insight explaining why the morning prayers begin with Adon Olam (Master of the World).

The Gemora in Berachos (26b) teaches that each of the Avos instituted one of the three daily prayers: Avrohom enacted Shacharis, Yitzchok originated Mincha, and

Yaakov introduced Maariv. As the morning prayers were instituted by Avrohom, who was the first person to refer to Hashem as Adon, we therefore begin Shacharis with Adon Olam. Upon reading this, the Gaon was overcome with joy and remarked that if only for the beauty and truth of this one insight, the publication of the entire work would be justified.

In a similar vein, the Meshech Chochmah explains why we are accustomed to wear a Tallis and Tefillin only during the morning prayers, even though both mitzvos are applicable the entire day. After miraculously defeating the armies of the four kings, Avrohom brought back all of the people and possessions which had been taken captive. The King of Sodom suggested that Avrohom return to him the people while keeping the possessions for himself. Lest the wicked king of Sodom take credit for making him rich, Avrohom refused to accept any gifts, emphatically swearing (14:23) that he wouldn't accept even a thread or a shoestraps. The Gemora in Sotah (17a) teaches that in the merit of this statement, Avrohom's descendants received the mitzvos of Tallis and Tefillin. Although they may be worn the entire day, because we merit receiving them through the actions of Avrohom, we are accustomed to commemorate this by wearing them during the morning prayers which he instituted.

To receive the full version with answers email the author at oalport@optonline.net.

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from **Si'ach Shaul, pg. 23 Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli zt"l**

One of the tests that Avraham underwent was the command to move on to a new place. Included in the test is the idea that being on the road and ending up in a new place can be difficult. As Rashi (Bereishit 12:2) tells us, being on the road decreases three things: one's notoriety, his wealth, and his ability to have children.

Part of the test was not only the willingness to leave his place but the effort to maintain equilibrium while doing so. When a person is in his own familiar place, he has a certain standing in the society, and he feels a natural tendency to try to preserve his stature and reputation. Often, for that reason, a person will hold himself back from doing something that could affect his status.

Avraham was well known where he came from, with a special place in society where he commanded a lot of respect, especially after the miracle of being saved from the furnace. That is when Hashem presented him with the command to move. Hashem was concerned that Avraham's actions might not be just for the pure intentions that he had worked on, but it could become, increasingly as time went on, a matter of rote or to preserve that which had been accomplished previously. That possibility of complacency could be a spiritual danger for one who wanted to maintain the genuine high level that Avraham did. That is why he had to go to a place where he had no reputation and was in fact unknown - to start from the beginning.

The idea behind this type of test is hinted at in the command to be involved in Torah study (as found in the context of the mitzva of Kri'at Shema) as the Torah said to "speak about them as you go on the path" (Devarim 6:7). One is not to take his mind off Torah even when he is on the move and has places where he must go. A person may want to get on the road quickly before it gets too hot or accomplish everything he needs to while he still can. One might think that he could miss Kri'at Shema and prayer that day so he can accomplish that which is necessary. The Torah tells us that this is not true, and, in fact, the one who taught this concept was Avraham, as Chazal tell us that it was he who instituted Shacharit (the morning prayer) (Berachot 26b).

* Written by the rabbi

from: **Destiny Foundation / Rabbi Berel Wein** <info@jewishdestiny.com> via rabbiwein.ccsend.com reply-to: info@jewishdestiny.com to Wed, Oct 9, 2013 subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein - Parshat Lech Lecha 5774 YECHEZKEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

I am not usually given to interpreting prophecy or dealing with messianic and/or apocalyptic visions. However, I have recently been reviewing the book of the prophet Yechezkel and could not help but think that many of the prophecies recorded in the middle section of the book are eerily similar to events that are occurring in our present day Middle Eastern part of the world. The prophet describes the demise of Tyre and Sidon (Lebanon) through bloodshed, economic weakness and civil turmoil. He predicts an awful war of bloodshed in Syria, Babylonia (Iraq), Yemen and Arabia. Libya and Egypt will also be beset by civil war, much bloodshed and death, and economic deprivation. At the same time,

the Jewish people will continue to return home to the Land of Israel and the country will flourish and remain an island of stability in the midst of the raging sea of chaos that surrounds it. That is a pretty accurate description of what is going on in the Middle East currently. Iraq, after decades of war, internecine turmoil and senseless destruction of its own infrastructure is pretty much a basket case today, in spite of all American efforts to put Humpty-Dumpty back together through democratic elections. From Pakistan in the east to the Maghreb in the west, the Middle East is busily engaged in murdering its own populations. The Sunni-Shiite split in the Moslem world has never been more violent and bitter than it is today. The Kurds and the Alewites, as well as the Druze and Christians are struggling to survive in what is left of Syria. Turkey faces a Kurdish breakaway, Al Qaida has rejuvenated itself, Afghanistan is ungovernable, Egypt is torn asunder and financially bankrupt, Libya is very unstable, Jordan totters on its weak legs fearing a Palestinian takeover, Sudan and Eritrea are engaged in horrific civil wars – in short, the whole Middle East is one awful bloody volatile mess. Except for our blessed Israel. And that is what Yechezkel said would happen when he prophetically peered far into the future times. Quite remarkable! There are many frightening visions regarding the Jewish people and the Land of Israel that also appear in the book of Yechezkel. Though the prophet foresees eventual redemption and triumph, blessing and tranquility, there apparently is a dark passageway that must be traversed before emerging into the light. The Talmud and Jewish tradition always portrayed the period preceding Israel's complete redemption as being a difficult one. As such, many of the great rabbis of the Talmud expressed the hope that they would be living in a different generation and thus be spared witnessing the events of that time. We would certainly hope that the persecutions suffered by our people over the past two centuries, culminating in the horrors of the Holocaust and the wars that Israel has been forced to fight in order to prevent its annihilation, will have certainly fulfilled that prophecy of tragedy and terrible trial. Yet, I still find the prophecies of Yechezkel very cryptic, mysterious and potentially disturbing. So my fall back position is the one expressed by Rambam - that one should not overly concentrate on interpreting such events and matters for they will eventually sort themselves out in God's good time and manner. The book of Yechezkel devotes a great deal of space to the description of the structure and service of the holy Temple in Jerusalem. Most biblical commentators ascribe all of these descriptions and details to the forthcoming Third Temple. Therefore those prophecies also still await the actuality of their fulfillment. Nonetheless the certainty of Yechezkel's prophecies and the details of his visionary descriptions give one confidence as to their accuracy and reality. The aforementioned realization of his prophecies regarding what our current Middle East would look like certainly lends credence to the further prophecies regarding the Third Temple and its establishment. Jews have read these prophecies for centuries on end and cherished them and believed in them when there seemed to be no possible way that they could ever actually materialize.

In our time when so many of the prophecies of our holy prophets have been fulfilled in exactitude in our lives and in front of our eyes, there really should be little if any doubt left as to the veracity of the remaining prophecies currently yet unfulfilled. Though the details of our future are shrouded from our gaze, the general outline of that future is discernible through the words of the prophets of Israel. Shabat shalom Berel Wein
 Rabbi Berel Wein

From: Rabbi Kaganoff <ymkaganoff@gmail.com> reply-to: kaganoff-a@googlegroups.com to: kaganoff-a@googlegroups.com
 date: Sun, Oct 6, 2013 at 9:07 AM subject: Must I Repeat my Tefillah?

Must I Repeat my Tefillah?
By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: First among equals!? Why is the first beracha of Shemoneh Esrei, which is called Birkas Avos, different from all the other berachos of Shemoneh Esrei? Question #2: Wanderings of the mind Mutti Kulis* calls me with the following predicament: Despite my best intentions, my mind sometimes wanders during davening, although I really wish I could focus always on building my relationship with Hashem. I recently discovered that the Mishnah Berurah rules that someone saying Shemoneh Esrei who realizes that he recited the first beracha without kavanah should refrain from proceeding until the chazzan's repetition, and be very attentive to the chazzan's davening. I tried this once, but did not find this solution practical. The Mishnah Berurah's suggestion also does not help my wife, who davens at home.

Although I am trying hard to think of the meaning of the words of the first beracha of Shemoneh Esrei, is there a different way to resolve the predicament should I discover at some time in the future that I recited this beracha without kavanah?

Answer: We should certainly always be careful to think of the meaning of the words every time we praise Hashem. We should be even more concerned when reciting our daily prayers, since they are called avodah shebelev, service of the heart, which means our emotional attachment to Hashem. Tefillah means talking directly to Hashem. When davening we should at least be as attentive as we are when engaging in a casual conversation with a friend. Even one who does not know the meaning of every word should pray realizing that he/she is speaking to Hashem. The purpose of prayer is to communicate directly to Hashem, and it is rather obvious that davening inattentively does not achieve its purpose. To quote the Shulchan Aruch: A person who is praying must focus on the meaning of the words that he is saying and imagine that he is facing the Divine Presence. One must do away with all distracting thoughts so that his focus is undisturbed. One should ponder how he would be attentive and choose his words carefully if he was speaking to a king of flesh and blood; certainly before the King of all kings, the Holy One, blessed is He (Orach Chayim 98:1). Yet we all know that, unfortunately, we often are inattentive during our davening. The Gemara itself notes that it is inherently human to become distracted during prayer (Yerushalmi, Berachos 2:4; Rosh Hashanah 16b and Bava Basra 164b as explained by Rabbeinu Tam). The question that this article will discuss is: Under what circumstances must one pray again because one was inattentive.

The Uniqueness of Birkas Avos Although one might think that all the berachos of Shemoneh Esrei should be treated equally, they are not. The first beracha, called "Birkas Avos," has a very special role to play. In reference to the promises that Avraham receives at the beginning of this week's parsha, the Gemara comments: Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said, "when the Torah states, 'and I will make you into a great nation' (Bereishis 12:2) – this refers to when we say in our prayer, 'Elokei Avraham' [The G-d of Avraham]; 'and I will bless you' – this refers to when we say, 'Elokei Yitzchak'; 'and I will make your name great' – this refers to when we say, 'Elokei Yaakov.' Perhaps the conclusion of the beracha should include all three forefathers? However, the Torah says, 'and you will be the blessing' – the conclusion of the beracha mentions only Avraham, not the others" (Pesachim 117b). Therefore, the first beracha of Shemoneh Esrei closes with the words Magen Avraham, that Hashem protected Avraham. We see that much of the structure of Birkas Avos is derived from the beginning words of our parsha.

Kavanah and Birkas Avos The Gemara teaches: Someone who is praying must be attentive to the entire prayer. If he is unable to pay attention to the entire prayer, then he should focus minimally on at least one of the berachos. Rabbi Chiya quoting Rav Safra in the name of one of the scholars of Rebbe's yeshiva explained that the beracha requiring attentiveness is Avos (Berachos 34b). Rashi explains that since Avos is the first beracha, failure to concentrate during its recital reveals that the individual is not really interested in davening, in which case it does not constitute a service. However, someone becoming preoccupied by his thoughts after the first beracha does not demonstrate that he did not want to daven, but simply that humans can easily be distracted. Another reason why attentiveness during Birkas Avos is essential is that Shemoneh Esrei begins with a blessing that focuses on Hashem's greatness, which is the entire purpose of prayer. If this blessing was recited without kavanah, one has failed to pray, thus requiring its repetition (Bach, Orach Chayim 101; Mishnah Berurah 101:3).

Should I not daven? If the entire purpose of prayer is to focus on Hashem's greatness, what should someone do if he realizes that because of circumstances beyond his control, he cannot possibly be attentive when he prays? On the one hand, the mitzvah requires him to pray properly, yet this is impossible to achieve. The Gemara rules that he is

exempt from prayer. Someone whose thoughts are unsettled should not pray... Rabbi Chanina did not pray on a day that he had gotten angry... One who returns from a trip should not pray for three days (Eruvin 65a). Rashi explains that because of the exhaustion of the trip he is not settled enough to pray properly until three days have passed. The Rambam codifies this: Any prayer recited inattentively is not a prayer. Someone who prayed without thinking must repeat the prayer attentively. If he finds that he is distracted, it is forbidden for him to pray until he composes himself. For this reason, someone returning from traveling who is exhausted or distressed may not pray until he composes himself. Our Sages said a person should wait three days until he is rested and calm, and only then should he pray (Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 4:15). Thus, we see that someone who cannot have kavanah because of extenuating circumstances, such as illness or exhaustion, is exempt from davening. Similarly, we find this recorded in another early halachic source, the Semag^{**}: A person should assess himself. If he is able to focus his prayer at least in Birkas Avos, then he should pray. If he is unable to focus this much, then he should not pray (Positive Mitzvah #19).

Beyond our poor power to add or detract The Shulchan Aruch modifies this conclusion, ruling as follows: A person should not pray in a place where something will distract him and not at a time when he is distracted. However, now we are not that meticulous about this because we do not concentrate that well in our prayers (Orach Chayim 98:2). Nevertheless, the Shulchan Aruch still rules that one must have a minimum amount of kavanah to fulfill the mitzvah of praying. To quote him: One who prays must be attentive to all the berachos. If he cannot do so, he should at least focus on the beracha of Avos. And if he was inattentive to Avos, even if he recited the rest of the berachos with kavanah, he should repeat the prayer (Orach Chayim 101:1).

Is it a prayer if it lacked kavanah? This takes us to a new question. What is the halacha if a person realizes after the fact that he recited the first beracha of Shemoneh Esrei without any kavanah? The following Talmudic passage discusses our question: Rabbi Yochanan said: I saw Rabbi Yannai pray, and then pray again (Berachos 30b). Why did Rabbi Yannai pray twice in quick succession? Rabbi Yirmiyah explained that Rabbi Yannai presumably had not prayed the first prayer with proper kavanah, and therefore repeated it. Although the Gemara ultimately rejects Rabbi Yirmiyah's interpretation of Rabbi Yannai's actions, the point is still halachically valid: Someone who davened without kavanah should repeat the Tefillah. This regulation is codified as follows: If a person prayed without any kavanah when reciting the first beracha, he should repeat his prayers (Hagahos Ashri, Berachos, end of Chapter 5).

Will I be repeating davening forever? This ruling may lead to the following predicament: If someone davened the first time without kavanah, perhaps he will daven again without kavanah. What will have been accomplished with the second davening? It is because of this concern that the above rule is adapted in the following statement: One who davens and did not focus on his prayer, if he knows that he can pray again and focus, he should repeat the prayer, and if not, he should not repeat the prayer (Sefer Hamitzvos Katan^{***}, Mitzvah #11). This last opinion is expanded by the Tur and, in turn, by the Rama (Orach Chayim 101), who rule that should someone fail to have kavanah during the beracha of Avos, one should not repeat one's prayer, because of the likelihood that he will not have kavanah the second time around either. This does not absolve us of the requirement to daven with kavanah, but merely explains that someone who davened without kavanah should not repeat the davening, since there is a good chance that the second davening will be no improvement over the first. For this reason, the Chayei Adam (34:2) rules that we do not repeat the Shemoneh Esrei. However he notes that if the person realizes prior to reciting the name of Hashem at the end of Avos that he did not daven with kavanah, he should return to the words Elokei Avraham and repeat most of the

beracha. In this instance, since the beracha was not yet completed, he should attempt to recite the beracha with proper kavanah.

We cannot concentrate, we cannot hallow... At this point, let us discuss Mutti's predicament. "Despite my best intentions, my mind sometimes wanders during davening, although I really wish I could focus always on building my relationship with Hashem. I recently discovered that the Mishnah Berurah rules that someone saying Shemoneh Esrei who realizes that he recited the first beracha without kavanah should refrain from proceeding until the chazzan's repetition, and be very attentive to the chazzan's davening. I tried this once, but did not find this solution practical. The Mishnah Berurah's suggestion also does not help my wife, who davens at home. Although I am trying hard to think of the meaning of the words of the first beracha of Shemoneh Esrei, is there a different way to resolve the predicament should I discover at some time in the future that I recited this beracha without kavanah?" Mutti is referring to the following point: The Mishnah Berurah (in Bi'ur Halacha 101:1 s.v. Vecha'idna) asks what should one do if, after completing the beracha of Avos, he realizes that he recited the first beracha without kavanah? How can he continue davening if he did not fulfill his mitzvah of praying? The Mishnah Berurah is assuming that without kavanah the Tefillah had no purpose at all. He therefore feels that the person who is in the middle of davening and realizes that he recited the first beracha without kavanah faces a conundrum. He may not continue davening because this davening is purposeless, and at the same time he may not repeat the beracha he has already recited because of concern that the repeated beracha will also be said without kavanah. The Mishnah Berurah therefore suggests that someone in this predicament should wait until the chazzan repeats the Shemoneh Esrei and have in mind to fulfill his prayer requirement by paying careful attention to the chazzan's words. Notwithstanding this analysis, the Mishnah Berurah notes that the Chayei Adam implies that once one has completed the first beracha of Shemoneh Esrei and realizes that he did not have kavanah, he may continue reciting Shemoneh Esrei. The question is why? The answer appears to be that although one is required to pray with kavanah, a prayer recited without kavanah does not have the status of a beracha recited in vain, and the remaining Tefillah is still considered a Tefillah.

Beyond our poor power... In explanation of this last point, the Kehilos Yaakov (Berachos #26) explains that there are two distinct responsibilities, one to recite prayers and the other to pray with kavanah. One who prayed without kavanah fulfilled one mitzvah but not the other. Therefore, the prayer recited without kavanah is not in vain, and even fulfills a mitzvah, but does not fulfill the greater mitzvah of praying with kavanah. Rav Elyashiv (published in Madrich Hakashrus Glatt, Volume 20, pg. 143) objects to this approach, contending that we do not find anywhere that there are two distinct different mitzvos involved in prayer. He therefore suggests an alternative approach: someone who prayed without kavanah fulfilled one's responsibility to daven, but the importance of praying with kavanah allows one who can do so to pray again. Rav Elyashiv compares this to praying a voluntary prayer, a tefilas nedavah. In the time of the Gemara when people usually prayed with kavanah, one who prayed without kavanah was strongly advised to repeat the prayer, this time with kavanah. The Tur and Rama are explaining that when there is a good chance that the subsequent prayer will also be without proper kavanah, one should not pray a second time, because the voluntary prayer is only in order to pray with kavanah, which we cannot guarantee will result.

Praying when unsettled However, both the Kehilos Yaakov and Rav Elyashiv's approaches are difficult to sustain in light of the following passage of Gemara, which we mentioned above: Someone whose thoughts are unsettled should not pray... Rabbi Chanina did not pray on a day that he had gotten angry... One who returns from a trip should not pray for three days (Eruvin 65a). According to both the Kehilos Yaakov and Rav Elyashiv, how can the Gemara rule that someone who is

unsettled should not pray? One who fails to pray abrogates the mitzvah of prayer, which they hold one fulfills even if the prayer lacks kavanah? The above Gemara implies that there is no point to pray if he will not have kavanah.

These unsuccessful prayers shall not be berachos in vain Rav Shelomoh Zalman Auerbach (Halichos Shelomoh, Tefillah I pg. 99) presents a different approach that explains the Chayei Adam's ruling beautifully. Indeed, one who prayed without the minimum kavanah did not fulfill the mitzvah of Tefillah. However, these berachos are still praises to Hashem and are therefore not considered to be in vain, notwithstanding that one did not fulfill the mitzvah of Tefillah. According to this analysis, reciting Shemoneh Esrei without any kavanah at all did not fulfill the mitzvah of Tefillah, but the nineteen berachos recited were all "kosher" berachos. Rav Shelomoh Zalman rallies support to his approach from the fact that we train children to daven, knowing full well that they are not going to have kavanah. If indeed this is considered a beracha levatalah, how could we do this? He therefore concludes that although a prayer without kavanah does not fulfill the mitzvah of Tefillah, it is nevertheless a valid beracha. It will count towards one's requirement to recite 100 berachos every day, which would certainly not be so if the beracha was in vain. Now, what happens if someone finds himself in Mutti's predicament? After completing the first beracha of Shemoneh Esrei, he realizes that he failed to have kavanah. The poskim rule that he should not repeat the davening. However, following the ruling implied by the Chayei Adam, he may continue his Tefillah and the berachos do not have the status of berachos levatalah, notwithstanding that he will not fulfill the mitzvah of Tefillah.

Although the Kehilos Yaakov and Rav Elyashiv proposed different approaches to resolve the question at hand, they also agree with the conclusion that Mutti may complete his Tefillah. Conclusion Certainly, one should do whatever one can to make sure to pay attention to the meaning of the words of one's Tefillah, and particularly to the first beracha of Shemoneh Esrei. Nevertheless, according to the Kehilos Yaakov, Rav Elyashiv and Rav Shelomoh Zalman Auerbach, one who failed to have kavanah on his first beracha may continue with his Tefillah.

* The name has been changed to protect his privacy. ** The author of this last statement is one of the Baalei Tosafos, Rabbi Moshe of Coucy, in his magnum opus, the Sefer Mitzvos Hagadol, which is usually called by its Hebrew acronym Semag. Although this work is not used today as one of the primary sources in deciding halacha, for a period of several hundred years this was one of the main, if not the primary source for halacha among Ashkenazic Jewry. Among the proofs that demonstrate this is the huge number of early commentaries written on it, and that it is one of the sources in halacha footnotes in the margin of the Gemara by the annotator Ein Mishpat. Although in the course of time, the Rosh and the Tur (and then later the Rama) supplanted the Semag as the main halachic source for Ashkenazi Jewry, it is still quoted extensively by the Beis Yosef and later commentaries. *** Shortly after the Semag authored his work, which encompasses all the halachos that the Gemara teaches, organized according to the 613 mitzvos, a different Baal Tosafos, Rav Yitzchak of Corveille, authored a briefer work that summarizes the halachos of the mitzvos that we can practice during the time of the churban when living outside of Eretz Yisrael. His work is called Sefer Hamitzvos Katan and is usually referred by the acronym Semak to distinguish it from the monumental work of the Semag.

[Weeklychizuk]

Weekly Chizuk

by Rabbi Eliezer Parkoff

- Parshas Lech Lecha Shema Yisrael Torah Network
to Weekly Parshas Lech Lecha

Build Your Own World

Excerpt from the sefer "Trust Me!" Adapted from a talk given by Moreinu v'Rabbeinu Ha-Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, zt"l, in 5755. And God said to Avram, "Go from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house, to the land which I will show you."?(Bereishis 12:1)

A person who seeks perfection in the service of Hashem must clarify and thoroughly understand what his job is in his world. (Mesillas Yesharim ch. 1)

With this powerful principle, the Mesillas Yesharim begins to lead us through the various stages of spiritual growth: to know what one's obligation is in "his" world. What is "his" world? The world a person creates through his actions. We read: "Everyone goes on to his world" [Koheles 12:5]. This teaches that each tzaddik is given his portion in the World to Come according to the honor he deserves" (Shabbos 152a).

Each person builds his own world - a spiritual world that he creates through his deeds.

R. Elazar said in the name of R. Chanina: "Torah scholars increase peace in the world, as it says [Yeshayahu 54:13]: 'and all your children shall be students of Hashem, and the peace of your children will be abundant.' Do not read banayich (???? - your sons) but rather bonayich (- your builders)."?(Berachos 64a)

There is an obvious question on this dictum: what right does the Tanna have to alter a word of the verse? It states banayich. How can R. Chanina change the letters, create a new word, and derive an apparently unintended implication? The Radak answers that although banayich (your children / your sons) is derived from the word ben (son), it also stems from the root-word boneh (build), because the son builds the family; he creates and builds the future generation - the greater family structure. Therefore, when the verse mentions children studying Torah, it is talking about the act of building in which Torah scholars engage. This is the job of talmidei chachamim - to build.

Each person was created to build; to perfect something in his lifetime. R. Yochanan ben Zakkai teaches in Pirkei Avos (2:8): "If you have studied a substantial amount of Torah, do not take credit for yourself, for this is the task you were created to perform." It is important to realize that this statement was made by R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, whom the Gemara credited with knowing the entire Torah (Succah 28a). It took him years of effort and toil to accomplish such an outstanding feat, yet he tells us that this is merely one's job in this world - to constantly engage in the building of spiritual edifices. R. Chaim Volozhin (in his work Ruach Chaim) writes that this is such an important facet of a person's being that, if he doesn't fulfill this obligation, he is reincarnated in order to complete the task.

R. Scheinberg continues:

A young yeshivah student once asked me how he could know if he was on the correct path. He explained that he often wondered if he was doing the right thing. He found that sometimes he was extremely motivated to study Torah and perform mitzvos, and yet the very next day he would lose all his desire and be ready to give everything up. He had so many questions and doubts.

In essence, this young man's trepidation - which all of us have felt at one time or another - can be addressed as follows: We have to be aware of the fact that we are the children of Avraham Avinu, and that his tests are our tests. The Ruach Chaim (5:2) writes that Avraham passed on his spiritual strength to us as an inherited trait. What he had to acquire through almost superhuman effort has since become a part of our nature, part of our spiritual "genes." Avraham Avinu was tested with the command "lech lecha" - "Go out from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house, to the land which I will show you" (Bereishis 12:1). The commentaries teach that Avraham's greatness in passing this test lay in the fact that he completely severed his ties with his past. One has to be ready to divorce himself from everything he knows and everyone he loves in order to launch a new career in the service of the

Almighty. R. Chaim Volozhin writes that it is in our very blood, as descendants of Avraham Avinu, to uproot ourselves from our lives in exile and immigrate to Eretz-Yisrael, and to forgo the comforts of the Diaspora and suffer hardship in order to live in a land full of spiritual values. The Test of Wandering

When Hashem caused me to wander...?(Bereishis 20:13).

There is another aspect to the trial of "lech lecha" as well. Avraham himself gave a very interesting explanation of his test. He said: "when Hashem caused me to wander..." (Bereishis 20:13). This was part of the trial of "lech lecha," to wander. As Ibn Ezra comments, he wandered about, not knowing his destination.

The implicit message of "lech lecha," and the way to pass a test when facing the unknown, is to remember that although the Almighty commands us to go forward, He is always there to guide and direct us.

When one contemplates this concept, it becomes clear how remarkable it is and how extraordinary was the test that Avraham faced.

Imagine that one day you get a direct, unequivocal command from Hashem: "Go!" Since He is the Creator of the universe, you really don't have much choice, so you obligingly reply, "O.K., but where to?" The Almighty answers, "Just go. When you reach your destination, you'll know." It's very unsettling to go without knowing where you're headed for - but once again, it's not really in your hands.

So you pack your suitcase and bid your family farewell. "Where are you going?" they ask you. "I have no idea, but I'll know when I get there." If this feels strange to you - who received a direct command from Hashem - you know how insane you must appear to others!

Yet still you go. You take a cab to the airport and go to the first desk you see. "I'd like to buy a ticket for the next plane out please." "Yes, where would you like to go?" "I don't know. Just get me a ticket on the next flight." "Oh. I see," answers the agent, giving you a strange look. She peruses the schedule and puts you on the next flight out, going to ... Well, what's the difference, as long as you go. That's what you were told to do, right?

Finally you arrive at your destination, and collect your baggage. You walk out of the terminal and begin to consider your next step. Suddenly a car pulls up, and a bearded man with a yarmulke perched on his head peers out at you from the window. "Hey, Reb Yid! What are you doing here? Where are you going?" "Well to tell you the truth, I don't know. I'm just going." "What are you talking about? You have nowhere to go? Get in the car, you'll come home with me." Does this sound like a nice story line? Well, that's "lech lecha." To go, and not know where you're going. But in reality, the Almighty is always with you, guiding your every step, even though you may not always be aware of this.

Next Stop, Beirut!

The following incident vividly illustrates this idea. It happened to a certain elderly talmid chacham whom I know personally.

After an extended visit to the United States, he was returning to the Holy Land to be with his family for the High Holidays. Rosh Hashanah was only several hours away, and he was on a very tight schedule. According to his itinerary, he was supposed to switch planes in Paris, but he was so exhausted from the flight that he slept straight through the stopover. He woke up when the plane was well on its way again, and with a start of dismay he realized what had happened. Before he even had the chance to explain his plight to the stewardess and ask where the plane was going, the captain announced over the loudspeaker, "Ladies and gentlemen, next stop - Beirut."

It doesn't take too much imagination to realize the quandary he was in - an obviously Jewish man about to enter a hostile Arab country. When the plane landed, the stewardesses covered him with blankets while the plane refueled and more passengers boarded. After they were safely in flight again, it occurred to the rabbi to ask where the next destination was - perhaps he could catch a plane to Tel Aviv from there. The answer hit him like a ton of bricks - Bangkok! With a sinking feeling, he

realized there was no way he would be home in time for the holiday. "Bangkok?" he thought. "There aren't any Jews in Bangkok! What am I going to do for Rosh Hashanah?"

After clearing customs, he was struck by an inspiration. He contacted the local U.S. Army base and asked if there was a Jewish chaplain there. It turned out that there was, as well as a few other Jewish soldiers. And there was a Rosh Hashanah service scheduled to take place on the base that was open to the public. In addition to military personnel, a few people from the city would be attending the service - Israeli tourists, and a few local businessmen. The rabbi made arrangements to stay on the base and acquired some fruit to eat, as it was impossible to obtain kosher food on such short notice.

It goes without saying that the shul - or to be more precise, the chapel - was not exactly an Orthodox one. The few Jews in Bangkok were not observant, and the seating was mixed. With the chaplain's consent, he set up a small, makeshift mechitzah, and sat behind it by himself.

The ersatz congregation was thrilled to have such a learned and distinguished personage in their midst, and asked him to speak. Over the course of the holiday, he delivered several sermons and taught impromptu classes. Many of the people were so inspired by his words that they took it upon themselves to observe Shabbos and other mitzvos. After the "uneventful" passing of Rosh Hashanah, the rabbi arranged a flight to Israel.

Several months later, he was walking down a street in Jerusalem when a young man excitedly stopped him. "Shalom aleichem! Do you remember me? I was in Bangkok during Rosh Hashanah and heard you speak in the chapel on the army base. I was so moved by what you said that I decided to come to Israel and study in a yeshivah."

Incredible! The Almighty had arranged the whole chain of events in order to get a young man to come to Jerusalem and attend a yeshivah! Although we may think it's amazing, it's really just one example of how Hashem directs events so that His will is carried out. Our job is to trust in Him and conduct our lives with the realization that everything occurs by design. Sometimes, as in this story, the hand of Divine Providence behind a sequence of events is obvious. In other situations, things may not be so clear. At all times, we must heed the words "lech lecha" - "go," with the understanding that He is guiding our footsteps and everything will ultimately work out for the best.

Gut Shabbos! © Rabbi Eliezer Parkoff 4 Panim Meiros, Jerusalem 94423 Israel Tel: 732-858-1257 Rabbi Parkoff is author of "Chizuk!" and "Trust Me!" (Feldheim Publishers), and "Mission Possible!" (Israel Book Shop Lakewood). If you would like to correspond with Rabbi Parkoff, or change your subscription, please contact: rabbi.e.parkoff@gmail.com

Peninim on the Torah by Rabi A. Leib Scheinbaum - Parshas Lech Lecha Shema Yisrael Torah Network

to Peninim PARSHAS LECH LECHA I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you, I will curse. (12:2) Avraham HaIvri is the name given to our first Patriarch, the individual who, with his own cognitive ability, was able to understand what had eluded an entire world: there is a Creator; He is One; He is the G-d of Creation and of history. With simple - but penetrating - logic, Avraham reached out to a pagan society and imbued them with faith and conviction in the Almighty. Yet, he was all alone, literally b'eiver echad, on one side - the opposing side of everybody else. Hence, the name Avraham HaIvri. We, his descendants, are heirs to this proud appellation, Ivrim, all of us on the opposite side of world society.

The life of our Patriarch has been an inspiration to all throughout the generations. He stood up against an entire world, without fear and without shame, and declared his belief in Hashem. As unpopular as he must have been, he was still respected. Hashem conferred a remarkable blessing upon him, from which we, his descendants, should take a lesson: Va'avarechecha va'agadlah shemecha veheyey brachah, "I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing." Va'avarcha mevarchecha u'mekaleelcha a'or, "I will bless those who bless you, and

him who curses you I will curse."

What an inspiring blessing. The Gaon, zl, m'Vilna, points out a twofold difficulty. First, the syntax of the pasuk does not follow the Biblical pattern. One would expect akaleil, "I will curse," to follow its matching vernacular, umekalelcha. Why is the word a'or used? Second, if those who cursed Avraham would, in turn, be cursed, how could all of the families of the earth be blessed?

The Gaon explains that a'or means to shed light! The brilliance of Avraham's life would illuminate the world with light. All will be beneficiaries of his self-generated sunshine - even those who curse him! Thus, in the end, all of the families of the world will be blessed by him. As his descendants, we must follow his prescription for living, so that we will bring luster to a world overshadowed with the darkness of immorality, hedonism, lack of integrity and modern-day paganism. The curses that plague society can be subverted with our blessings. How appropriate is the maxim: "Instead of cursing the darkness, we should light a candle."

When one thinks about it, Avraham was up against a pervasive, opposing world view, but, for many people the primary issue was ignorance. They had been raised as pagans; thus, their minds could not comprehend monotheism. Once Avraham broke through the barrier, he was able to encourage conversation. True, some were diehards, such as Nimrod, the self-proclaimed god/king, but we must face it: he had a good reason for seeking to quell Avraham's "nonsense"; it was hurting his business.

Many spiritual leaders throughout the generations have been compelled to deal with a much greater and more virulent foe: their own coreligionists who have fallen under the influence of the American dream. Let us go back to America, circa early twentieth century, when the Agudas Kehillos, United Communities, which were really not so united, brought in a Rav Hakolel, Chief Rabbi for New York. Horav Yaakov Yosef, zl, was a Lithuanian Torah scholar from Vilna, who attempted to serve as Rav over the splintered and fractitious European immigrant communities who called New York their home. These people came here, some searching for riches, others hoping to find sustenance. For the most part, however, they were simple, hard-working Jews, who were too farhorevet, literally knocked-out from over-working, to care very much about their religious dimension. They were embittered and distrustful of anyone who would stand in the way of their achieving their dream.

Horav Tzvi Hirsch Rabinowitz, zl, son of the Kovner Rav, was the first one to be offered the position of chief rabbi. He demurred, saying, "A Rav can only be appointed over a Kehillah, congregation of Jews. For a Rav to create Jews, however, is impossible. Only Moshe Rabbeinu could have accomplished such a miracle. In America, we have to create Yidden, and that is something I cannot do."

In addition, no yeshivos existed to educate the masses, thus allowing for the scourge of assimilation to fester and grow. There were sham rabbis, who, for a few dollars would perform any religious ceremony that one required for convenience sake. The Satmar Rebbe, zl, was wont to say that the reason that so many Jews of that early generation assimilated was their neglect of the "small things." It did not start with blatant chillul Shabbos, desecration of Shabbos; it began with a quick trip to the barber to remove their beard and payos, vestiges of the European shtetl "mentality." Shortly thereafter, their entire Yiddishkeit followed. America was - and continues to be - a free-country. One can dress however he chooses. We have had every type of style grace the public arenas of every major metropolis: hippies, gypsies, artists and carefree folk who have no sense of style other than what enters their mind at any given moment. Hairstyles of every persuasion, from conformist to mohawk to satanist and every eccentricity and derangement in between. No one seems to care - except the Jew, who feels that going in public sporting a beard and payos, black suit and hat, or even a yarmulke - regardless of color, size and material - is offensive.

Indeed, many of these same Americanized Jews, who have no problem with the Amish in their antiquated mode of dress and so many others that have maintained their tribal, cultural, religious garb, cannot tolerate a Jewish brother who looks "different."

A young chassidic man was in a shop in Williamsburg, when an elderly couple entered the store, together with a young, strapping lad of about sixteen. The teenager was bareheaded. The father turned to the chassidic teenager and asked, "Boychik, how much money do you want for your payos?"

The woman was furious with her husband's mockery, "You American, what do you know about Yiddishkeit in the alter heim, old home, Europe?" She suddenly burst into tears, "The Rebbe's einiklach, grandchildren, wore such payos." She then started naming the names of the Komarner Rebbe's children.

"I come from Komarna," the woman began. "As a young girl, I was in the home of the Komarna Rebbe, Horav Yaakov Moshe Safran, zl. His daughter, the Munkatcher Rebbetzin, was my friend. His son Boruch'l, the last Rebbe of Komarna, was killed by the Nazis. Before I left Europe, I received a brachah from

the Rebbe." Sadly, now her only son did not look like a Jew.

Avraham Avinu had it hard, but he was not going up against disenfranchised brothers. The purpose of the above is not to lay blame, but rather, to encourage and empower. The Jewish People, heralding back to our forefather Avraham, have a history of being on one side against the masses. It goes with the territory of being a Jew. Today's society should not present a greater challenge than the ones over which our parents and grandparents triumphed. Had they not been able to do so, we would not be here.

And he invoked Hashem by Name. (12:8)

Much credit is given to Avraham Avinu - and rightfully so. Using his intellectual skills, he was able to determine that there is a G-d Who created and continues to guide the world. He went about sharing his newly-discovered observation with whomever he met. This, of course, ruffled the feathers of those who were entrenched in paganism, especially someone like Nimrod, the king who claimed divinity for himself. Avraham was to be removed. One cannot have a dissenter who disputes and proves that the life he is living is a sham.

The Patriarch was to be thrown into a fiery cauldron for his seditious claims. Avraham was so sure of his discovery that he was willing to risk his life for his convictions. He emerged unscathed, promptly returning to preaching to the masses. Was he the only one who taught about G-d? Shem, and his grandson, Eivar, had a yeshivah which taught the ethical and moral life values of serving the Almighty. We do not have a record of their success, while Avraham reached out to thousands. The mere fact that Nimrod wanted him removed from the scene is a barometer of his success.

The Raavad distinguishes between Shem and Eivar, who taught those who attended their yeshivah, while Avraham journeyed throughout the land, approaching people, chasing after them, wearing them down, all for one purpose: to teach them about Hashem. Outreach means just that: reaching out. We cannot wait for them to come to us. We must reach out to them.

The King of Sodom said to Avram, "Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself (14:21).

The king of Sodom had no problem with what seems to have been an audacious request. As a victor of the war, Avraham Avinu was entitled to all of the spoils. The king said that he would like his subjects to be returned to him, and Avraham could keep the money. Avraham had no intent in personal gain, especially from a pagan who would certainly claim that he was the source of Avraham's wealth. Avraham conveyed his feelings to the king of Sodom and then returned everything to him - people as well as money. In the Talmud Nedarim 32a, Chazal maintain that, while returning the wealth was praiseworthy, returning the people constituted an error on the part of the Patriarch. By not exposing them to his monotheistic belief, he was subjecting them to a continued life of paganism. The Ran comments, "Had Avraham not given up these people to Sodom, he would have been able to influence them to convert. For this, he was punished, such that his descendants were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years.

This seems paradoxical. Avraham devoted his entire life to the dissemination of Hashem's truth to all people. Wherever he went, and whenever the opportunity arose, he would spread the word of Hashem. He had a house open to everyone - regardless of beliefs or character. Yet, because one time he did not fight for these people, thereby allowing them to return to the hedonism that characterized Sodom, he was gravely punished. Certainly, one whose lifelong goal is outreach and who exemplifies its implementation should not be so severely taken to task for a solitary failure in fulfilling this mitzvah.

Twenty-three years ago, in my inaugural edition of Peninim, I quoted the Telshe Rosh Yeshivah, Horav Chaim Mordechai Katz, zl, who derives a critical lesson concerning the awesome responsibility one has to spread the truth of Torah throughout the world, from this pasuk. No parameters limit one's obligation to proclaim and publicize Hashem's Name in this world. Avraham left his father's home and dedicated his life to this goal, and yet - for his one failure - he was punished. This teaches us that our responsibility to reach out to our fellow Jew is to reach out consistently. One failure means that precious souls will be lost. This is an unforgivable loss.

No subject is more reachable and more critical to reach than Jewish children. They must be our priority as parents, teachers, and members of the Jewish community. We must see to it that every Jewish child receives a bona-fide Jewish education, rendered by teachers who are paradigmatic of the highest Torah standards, in an environment that is replete with these standards and is a welcoming place ready to embrace all Jewish children who are ready to learn - regardless of background, financial ability or pedigree. As of late, a "good" school is judged by how many students it refuses - not by how many it accepts. Since this was the standard of chesed in Sodom, it was probably also its standard of education.

I have taken the liberty to share a few inspiring vignettes from the lives of gedolei hador, Torah giants of the previous generation, as a way of setting the record straight concerning the critical importance of teaching Torah with consistency and dedication:

A Yerushalmi avreich, a young married man, who was himself not a Gerrer Chassid, came to see the Gerrer Rebbe, the Bais Yisrael, during the Rebbe's hours of reception. The Rebbe asked, "I believe you are a cheder rebbe. How did you manage to leave school during 'business hours'?" The young man excused himself, saying, "What can I do? When I finish teaching, the Rebbe's door is closed." The Rebbe told him, "Go back to your students. I will wait for your return." When the young man returned, long after the reception hours were over, he was immediately permitted entrance to the Rebbe.

At the beginning of his sefer, Amalah Shel Torah, the Steipler Gaon, Horav Yisrael Yaakov Kanievsky, zl, extolls the virtue of the ben Torah. Among the many accolades, he includes the following: "Since time immemorial, Yiddishkeit has owed its ongoing survival to the influence and guidance of its Torah sages, the delight of each generation who disseminated Torah to flocks of disciples and took numerous measures to ensure that Torah not be forgotten by the Jewish People. Hashem has shown us tremendous kindness by providing us throughout the generations with yeshivos, multitudes of scholars... all subservient to the might of the Torah sages of every generation.

"We sometimes see a Torah scholar and a tzaddik, righteous person, emerging from a simple home. This is the result of a grandmother who poured out her heart in tearful prayer that she would merit descendants who would be Torah scholars. Even if her prayers did not help her sons, they were efficacious for her grandsons. No prayer goes unanswered."

Shortly after the Six-Day War, an organization bearing the name Moreshes Avos was established to reach out to many seekers of Torah whose neshamos were catalyzed by the many miracles evident in that military victory. The organization's founder asked the Steipler whether it was appropriate to recruit Avreichim studying in Kollel to join him in his efforts. The Steipler replied, "How can one entertain the thought of taking them out of the bais ha'medrash? Why, all of the miracles that took place were only in the merit of their Torah learning!"

"I have lost all my family; I have lost everything - but I have not lost HaKadosh Baruch Hu." These were the words of the indefatigable Klausenberger Rebbe, zl, a Holocaust survivor who managed to triumph over his personal losses and singlehandedly undertook the task of reconstructing Jewish life from amidst the ruins. Torah-study was the only endeavor that soothed his tormented soul. His brilliance was matched by his encyclopedic erudition of Torah. It was only superseded by his love for Torah.

Indeed, despite his numerous projects, especially once he moved to Eretz Yisrael in 1960, the Rebbe viewed his principal vocation as none other than teaching Torah to young talmidim, students. Shortly after his move, he wrote to a friend, "You have surely heard that I have become a teacher; taking some twenty children and several teenagers to my bais ha'medrash where they are under my close personal scrutiny almost all day. I must work diligently and with great toil, being preoccupied with this endeavor to an extent which you cannot imagine... but this is the only thing out of all of my work in which my soul finds pleasure. Would that their numbers double and triple, so that the singsong of pure children's Torah-study reverberates in my bais ha'medrash.

"Naturally, some of our friends feel that it detracts from the dignity of being a Rebbe, arguing that a Rebbe should not engage in such activity and that it is utterly incompatible with the position of Rebbe. In my opinion, we could do with a thousand such Rebbes (who would spend their day teaching Torah). Indeed, it is worthwhile training a single worthy disciple, who in the merit of our holy ancestors and of the Holy Land... will sanctify Hashem's Name by following in the footsteps of our holy ancestors."

The Rebbe was wont to say, "It is worth living one hundred and twenty years solely to train one single worthy disciple and guide him on the Torah's path."

His father-in-law, the Nitra Rav, zl, Horav Shmuel David Unger, was the head of its yeshiva, a position which involved fund-raising as well as spiritual guidance. At one point, the yeshiva was in dire financial straits. A Viennese layman, a former disciple of Rav Unger, proposed that the Rav spend Shabbos in Vienna. If he would agree to do so, the man would agree to cover the yeshiva's entire deficit.

Rav Unger demurred, citing his responsibility to deliver his shiur, Torah lecture, to his students on Thursday night and Friday morning. The man asked, "And what will happen if your honor forgoes giving the shiur?"

"I need money for the yeshiva in order to support Torah-study," Rav Unger replied. "Not the other way around... If it means suspending Torah study, I have no need for money."

He consorted with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had

conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem. (16:7)

It happens all of the time: one strikes it rich and suddenly it is all about him; he is the worthy; he is righteous and worthy of blessing. Horav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita, explains that such a person follows in the footsteps of Hagar. As soon as she conceived, she began to boast brazenly, "Since so many years have passed without my mistress having children, she obviously is not as righteous as she seems. I conceived immediately!" Herein is revealed the difference between Jew and gentile. When Hagar saw that Hashem had showered her with His benevolence, her attitude should have been one of humility, with a profound sense of gratitude, but, she reacted to the contrary.

Not so a Jew who is blessed by Hashem. He maintains a sense of humility and responsibility, wondering if he is deserving of Hashem's benevolence. Is he receiving his ultimate reward prematurely in this world? Has he forfeited his Olam Habba, portion in the World to Come?

We must realize that good fortune in this world often comes with strings attached. Likewise, when one's fortune is not as positive as he would like, he should realize that it is for a reason. One who strikes it rich or has incredible siyata diShmaya, Divine assistance, should act reserved, humble and assume that Hashem has granted him a gift beyond his worthiness. Indeed, the more one receives - the more he should be humbled. Conceit is an attribute which Hagar exemplified.

And an Angel of Hashem said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her domination." (16:9)

Rashi quotes the Midrash that, for each and every amirah, communication, Hashem sent another angel to speak with Hagar. There is a dispute among Chazal as to the number, whether there were four or five angels. What is the reason that a new angel was required for every pronouncement? Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl, explains that a malach, angel, is an omeid, static, does not experience spiritual elevation. He is what he is and remains on that level. Unlike a human being, an angel cannot grow spiritually. His spiritual plateau has a limited parameter to which he adheres. His mission is in accordance with his specific level. Thus, once his shlichus, mission, has concluded, or the spiritual level of his mission has been altered, he is freed from it. Once the mission has been completed, the angel disappears and returns to his place.

A person is a baal aliyah, able to scale spiritual heights. Indeed, with every word, he grows spiritually. One moment is unlike the preceding moment, something which continues throughout one's life. We change - we grow. The spiritual plane which we enjoyed before reciting Shema Yisrael during Shacharis, Morning Prayer service, is altered once we have completed the prayer, applying the intention, feeling and direction that goes with it. One angel does not remain with us throughout our lives. We change almost constantly.

Rav Zaitchik focuses on Hagar's spiritual level when she conversed with the angel for the first time. She was suffering abuse and pain that she felt was unwarranted. She was a depressed, broken woman, alone in the wilderness, without protection. The angel began the conversation, "The maidservant of Sarah, from where did you come?" She replied, "I am fleeing from my mistress, Sarah." The angel referred to her as a shifchah, maidservant, and she responded that it was true; she was running from her mistress. Most people fail to concede that they are slaves. Hagar had no problem with her position. Why? Normally, one does not like talking about a past that was miserable and filled with demeaning servitude. Why did Hagar respond to the angel with a sort of "pride" - "Yes, I am Sarah's maidservant?" Furthermore, why did the angel commence his questioning by referring to Hagar as a maidservant?

Rav Zaitchik explains that the dialogue between the angel and Hagar indicates a much deeper meaning than what appears on the surface. The angel's reference to Hagar's position had a dual implication. First, she was a slave, which was clearly not a prestigious position in life. Second, was the flipside. While her vocation was not something that warranted bragging rights, she was, at least, working for Sarah Imeinu. To be exposed to such an elevated spiritual source, to have the opportunity to be in the proximity of such a righteous and pure person, to imbibe from her fountain of inspiration, is truly fortuitous.

Hagar responded, in turn, with fierce pride. "Yes, I am a maidservant, but I am no ordinary maidservant; I am Sarah's maidservant. This grants me exposure to an unprecedented source of inspiration." Once Hagar responded with such depth of vision, she demonstrated that she was truly no ordinary maidservant. This warranted another angel, due to her elevated spiritual standing. The next step was the new angel instructing her to return to Sarah, which, when she complied, once again raised her degree, necessitating yet another angel. As the conversation progressed, Hagar's acquiescence with faith and conviction added to her spiritual account.

A similar lesson is to be inferred from the commentary of the Zohar HaKadosh to the angel's declaration to Avraham Avinu following the Akeidah. "And the angel

called to him from Heaven. He said, "Avraham, Avraham!" The Zohar comments, "There is a psik taama, grammatical interruption, between the two 'Avraham's,' because the second Avraham is unlike the first." The Avraham that had entered into the Akeidah was not on the same spiritual standing as was the Avraham that emerged from the Akeidah. Thus, the second address required a new angel, which is indicated by the interruption.

The lesson to be derived from the above is simple and practical: we must strive for continued growth, because, with every rung of the spiritual ladder which we scale, we are accorded greater and more profound spiritual exposure.

V'shinantam levanecha v'dibarta bam. And teach them thoroughly to your children and speak of them.

The command to teach Torah to our children is the direct result of our love of Torah. When one loves something and considers it precious, he wants to share it with his children. One wants to bestow good on his children, and there is no greater good than Torah. By means of constant teaching, we demonstrate to our children the esteem in which we hold divrei Torah, thus bringing them to also love Torah and the One Who commanded it.

V'shinantam can have two meanings: v'shinantam - the words of Torah shall be sharp in your mouth; Shinun also means repetition. We have sharpness and repetition. Horav Avigdor Miller, zl, posits that both of these meanings are connected. The sharpness of arrows and knives is achieved by repeated application to the whetstone. Likewise, sharpness of acumen is realized by constant repetition and diligent study. This is imperative in the exhortation lilmud u'lelameid, lishmor, "To learn and to teach, to guard." To guard means to review constantly: 1) in order not to forget; 2) and not to permit the impression on the mind to wane.

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The Vanishing American Jew?

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech

The recent Pew Report on Jewish identity is a wake-up call for all of us.

For years I would laugh at the irony.

In 1964, Look magazine ran a cover story entitled "The Vanishing American Jew." Boldly, with the self-assurance of a national publication that had millions of readers, the article clearly explained why in all certainty there would no longer be any Jews left in the United States in the 21st century.

Well, we all know what happened.

Jews survived, but Look magazine disappeared.

We could afford to be amused that once again those who predicted our early demise were so powerfully mistaken.

In the immortal words of Mark Twain who had the remarkable experience of reading his own erroneous obituary in the local newspaper, the report of our death was greatly exaggerated.

In fact, people have been writing our obit almost from the time of our birth. The oldest recorded mention of the name Israel is in an Egyptian hymn of victory dating to Pharaoh Mer-nep-tah (about 1230 BCE), and it reads, "Israel is laid waste, his offspring is wiped out." Yet somehow history records a different ending to the story. Passover reminds us that it was Pharaoh and his people who were defeated by the miraculous intervention of God. And the Jews to this day, descendants of slaves in what was once a glorious Empire, continue to write magnificent chapters in the story of mankind.

That's why I've never really been frightened by pessimistic predictions about our survival. In a famous essay, the historian Simon Rawidowicz put it beautifully when he described the Jews as "the ever-dying people." We always stood on the precipice of extinction - only to amaze onlookers with our super-human ability to persevere and to contribute in unparalleled fashion to creating a more civilized world.

But that doesn't mean the results of the just released Pew Research Center report, titled "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" haven't given me reason for grave concern. In a nationally conducted survey of a statistically representative and significant number of Jews across the country, the Pew Institute attempted to explore the meaning of Jewish identity today. What does being Jewish mean at present and how does it relate to issues like denominational affiliation, politics, intermarriage rates, views on Israel, as well as character traits and actions deemed "essential to

their Jewish identity"?

The answers were far from reassuring.

To put it as bluntly as possible, the post-Holocaust generation which thankfully no longer needs to be concerned with genocide appears to be existentially endangered by the threat of suicide. What could never be accomplished by the pogroms and persecution of our enemies seems a reasonable peril to our survival by way of voluntary assimilation and self-chosen rejection of our heritage.

Note the following ominous signs which have exponentially increased in just the past few decades:

While 56 percent of the general public say that religion is very important in their lives, the same is true for only 26 percent of American Jews. Entrusted by God with the task of serving as "a light unto the nations," we Jews have tragically become doubly more secular than those amongst whom we live.

Thirty-two percent of Jews born after 1980 — the so-called millennial generation — identify as Jews of no religion, compared to 19% of baby boomers and just 7% of Jews born before 1927. Overall, 22% of US Jews describe themselves as having no religion, meaning they are much less connected to Jewish organizations and much less likely to be raising their children Jewish.

A growing proportion of American Jews say they are unlikely to raise their children Jewish or connect with Jewish institutions. The proportion of Jews who say they have no religion and are Jewish only on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity or culture is growing rapidly, and two-thirds of them are not raising their children Jewish at all.

The study finds that intermarriage rates appear to have significantly increased over the past fifty years. Nearly 60 percent of Jewish respondents who have been married since 2000 say they have a non-Jewish spouse. Just over 40 percent of those married in the 80s have a non-Jewish spouse. That number is just 17 percent for those married before 1970.

I could go on - but it's just too painful. Of all the findings in the report, what for me struck the most agonizing chord was the one that focused on how respondents chose to list the factor that best exemplifies the meaning of being Jewish. For 19% it was observing Jewish law. 14% claimed it was eating traditional foods. But coming in at more than twice the percentage of these responses for singling out what is essential to being Jewish, 42% said "having a good sense of humor."

Is it really conceivable that almost half of contemporary American Jewry believes that Judaism has more to do with Seinfeld than Sinai? And can Jews find their moorings, their strength, and their reason for survival from their jokes rather than the inspiration found from their spiritual tradition?

Within every tragedy, our sages teach us, there are the seeds of redemption. So too I believe must be our response to this report which alerts us to the sad state of contemporary American Jewry.

Most Jews, the study reveals, do not believe that one has to believe in God in order to be Jewish. Technically, according to Jewish law, that is correct. Yet history affirms that without belief in God and the divine origin of the Torah, Judaism is downgraded to mere 'tradition' - i.e.: something you don't need to take all that seriously. Why should young people more interested in the latest fix take any time to learn and practice an ancient document that doesn't really speak to them? Only a Judaism that speaks of enduring wisdom and truth stands a chance of imbuing the next generation with the commitment to choose to remain part of our people.

The Pew Report is a challenge to our complacency, to our secularism, to our very identity. It is a wake-up call for all of us. It makes a strong demand upon us to make a meaningful commitment to the traditions and the faith of our past if we hope to be a link in the chain of the survival of our people.

And in spite of everything, I remain optimistic.

This article can also be read at: <http://www.aish.com/jw/s/The-Vanishing-American-Jew.html>

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