

Home Weekly Parsha NITZAVIM-VAYELECH
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

These final parshiyot of the Torah always coincide with the approaching end of the old year and the beginning of the new year. This is in line with the contents of these parshiyot which contain the review of Moshe's career as the leader of Israel and of his life and achievements. So too does the end of the year demand of us a review, if not of our entire past life, at least a review and accounting of our actions during the past year.

Moshe's review is really the main contents of the book of Dvarim itself. Though it recalls historical and national events, there is no doubt that Moshe himself is the central figure of the book. He records for us his personal feelings and candidly admits as to his disappointments and frustrations. But he never departs from his central mission of reminding the people of Israel of the unbreakable covenant that has been formed between them and their Creator.

That covenant is renewed again in this week's parsha. It is no exaggeration to assert that it is constantly renewed and at the year's end we are reminded of this. That is the essential essence of remembrance that characterizes this special season of the year. Remembrance brings forth judgment and accountability and leads to an eventual renewal of faith.

Moshe reminds the people that the future is also contained in their remembrance of the covenant. All the generations past, present and future are bound together in this covenant of accountability. And through this process, the mortal Moshe gains immortality, as all of us can acquire this immortality through our loyalty to the covenant.

Moshe at the end of his life has in no way lost his acumen, strength or vision. He leaves this world in perfect health and free of bodily ailments and restraints. Yet he tells us in this week's parsha that he "can no longer go forth and return." For humans exist by the will of God and when that will decrees the end of life then the human being will cease to function on this earth. Who can claim greater merits in this world than Moshe had? Yet the hand of human mortality struck him down.

Part of the great lesson of Torah is that life continues without us necessarily being present. Moshe sees far into the distant future but knows that he will not be present to see those events actually unfold. He harkens back to the covenant of remembrance as being the instrument of his continuing presence throughout all of Jewish history. As long as the covenant is remembered and observed, Moshe is still present with Israel. It is this covenant that defines us as a people and even as individuals. Our relationship to it is under constant heavenly review. It should be self-evident that for our part we should enthusiastically renew our allegiance to it at this fateful part of our life and year.

Shabat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

To Renew our Days
NITZAVIM, VAYELECH
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The moment had come. Moses was about to die. He had seen his sister Miriam and brother Aaron pre-decease him. He had prayed to God – not to live forever, not even to live longer, but simply, "Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan" (Deut. 3:25). Let me complete the journey. Let me reach the destination. But God said no: "That is enough," the Lord said. "Do not speak to Me anymore about this matter."

Deut. 3:26

God, who had acceded to almost every other prayer Moses prayed, refused him this.[1]

What then did Moses do on these last days of his life? He issued two instructions, the last of the 613 commands, that were to have significant consequences for the future of Judaism and the Jewish people. The first is known as Hakhel, the command that the king should summon the people to gather during Succot following the seventh, Shemittah year:

"At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns – so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

Deut. 31:10-13

There is no specific reference to this command in the later books of Tanach, but there are accounts of very similar gatherings: covenant renewal ceremonies, in which the king or his equivalent assembled the nation, reading from the Torah or reminding the people of their history, and calling on them to reaffirm the terms of their destiny as a people in covenant with God.

That, in fact, is what Moses had been doing for the last month of his life. The book of Deuteronomy as a whole is a restatement of the covenant, almost forty years and one generation after the original covenant at Mount Sinai. There is another example in the last chapter of the book of Joshua (see chapter 24 of the book of Joshua), once Joshua had fulfilled his mandate as Moses' successor, bringing the people across the Jordan, leading them in their battles, and settling the land.

Another occurred many centuries later in the reign of King Josiah. His grandfather, Menasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years, was one of the worst of Judah's kings, introducing various forms of idolatry, including child sacrifice. Josiah sought to return the nation to its faith, ordering among other things the cleansing and repair of the Temple. It was in the course of this restoration that a copy of the Torah was discovered,[2] sealed in a hiding place, to prevent it being destroyed during the many decades in which idolatry flourished and the Torah was almost forgotten. The king, deeply affected by this discovery, convened a Hakhel-type national assembly:

“Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the Temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets – all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes, and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the Covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the Covenant.”

2 Kings 23:1-3

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

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

Something profound was being transacted here. Recall that God had seemed brusque in His dismissal of Moses' request to be allowed to cross the Jordan. “That is enough ... Do not speak to Me anymore about this matter.” Is this the Torah and this its reward? Is this how God repaid the greatest of the prophets? Surely not.

In these last two commands God was teaching Moses, and through him Jews throughout the ages, what immortality is – on earth, not just in heaven. We are mortal because we are physical, and no physical organism lives forever. We grow up, we grow old, we grow frail, we die. But we are not only physical. We are also spiritual. In these last two

commands, we are taught what it is to be part of a spirit that has not died in four thousand years and will not die so long as there is a sun, moon, and stars.[3]

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

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

The concept of covenant played a decisive role in European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, especially in Calvin's Geneva and in Scotland, Holland, and England. Its longest-lasting impact, though, was on America, where it was taken by the early Puritan settlers and remains part of its political culture even today. Almost every Presidential Inaugural Address – every four years since 1789 – has been, explicitly or implicitly, a covenant renewal ceremony, a contemporary form of Hakhel. In 1987, speaking at the bicentennial celebration of the American Constitution, President Ronald Reagan described the constitution as a kind of “covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind... It's a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with the Supreme Being to whom our founding fathers did constantly appeal for assistance.” America's duty, he said, is “to constantly renew their covenant with humanity... to complete the work begun 200 years ago, that grand noble work that is America's particular calling – the triumph of human freedom, the triumph of human freedom under God.”[4]

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

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

Renewal is one of the hardest of human undertakings. Some years ago, I sat with the man who was about to become Prime Minister of Britain. In the course of our conversation he said, “What I most pray for is that when we get there (he meant, 10 Downing Street), I never forget

why I wanted to get there.” I suspect he had in mind the famous words of Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963, who, when asked what he most feared in politics, replied, “Events, dear boy, events.”

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

The only way to stay young, hungry, and driven is through periodic renewal, reminding ourselves of where we came from, where we are going, and why. To what ideals are we committed? What journey are we called on to continue? Of what story are we a part?

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

[1] There is an important lesson here: It is the prayers we pray for others, and others pray for us, that are answered; not always those we pray for ourselves. That is why when we pray for the healing of the sick or the comfort of the mourners we do so specifically “in the midst of others” who are ill or bereaved. As Judah Halevi pointed out in *The Kuzari*, the interests of individuals may conflict with one another, which is why we pray communally, seeking the collective good.

[2] This is Radak and Ralbag’s understanding of the event. Abarbanel finds it difficult to believe that there were no other copies of the Torah preserved even during the idolatrous periods of the nation’s history, and suggests that what was discovered sealed in the Temple was Moses’ own Torah, written by his hand.

[3] See Jeremiah 31.

[4] Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1987, 1040-43.

Community Rabbis without Charge, And Decent Salaries for Teachers

Revivim

During the time of the rabbinic Sages, the Tannaim, rabbis earned their living through their own labor and taught Torah for free. But in later generations, this ideal combination proved difficult to sustain * A reality in which a rabbi must demand his wages caused a desecration of God’s honor, and therefore, many eminent Sages refused to serve in the rabbinate * Ideally, a community’s rabbi

should receive a proper salary , but until that materializes, it is fitting for the community’s Torah scholars to teach Torah, and serve as rabbis free of charge * The representatives of the Ministry of Finance and the Teachers Union should be praised for signing a salary agreement last year, which honors teachers, and encourages the influx of new forces into the calling

Two weeks ago, I proposed encouraging communities to appoint rabbis even without pay – rabbis who would focus on the core rabbinic duty of teaching Torah, such as by giving a regular lesson between Mincha and Maariv, or after Maariv. I made this proposal out of an assessment that in the coming years, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is unlikely to appoint and finance rabbis acceptable to Religious-Zionist communities. Some readers took umbrage at my words, fearing harm to the prospects of communities funding rabbis and empowering their role.

Just as I Teach for Free, You Too Shall Also Teach for Free

I too believe it is good to fund synagogue rabbis, but my proposal stemmed from recognizing the reality that in the vast majority of Religious-Zionist synagogues in the larger cities, there is no rabbi. City and neighborhood rabbis do not fill this void either, since for decades, almost only rabbis who do not share the Religious-Zionist public’s Torah outlook have been appointed to these positions. To begin amending this, we must get back to basics – the deepest and most primary role of the rabbi – to teach Torah. And this role should be carried out for free.

Our Sages said that rabbis should teach Torah for free, “As God commanded me – just as I teach for free, you too shall also teach for free” (Nedarim 37a). Thus, our Sages instructed in the Mishnah (Nedarim 35b) that even one who swore off benefit from another, may still teach him ” midrash, halakhot, and aggadot,” since one must teach them for free. So by teaching him, one does not provide him monetary worth.

The Guidance of Our Sages

This was also the advice of our Sages to rabbis, not to make a living from the Torah: “Rabbi Zadok said: do not make them a crown for self-exaltation, nor a spade with which to dig. So too Hillel used to say, “And he that puts the crown to his own use shall perish.” Thus you have learned, anyone who derives worldly (monetary) benefit from the words of the Torah, removes his life from the world” (Avot 4:5). And Rashi, Rambam, Bartanura and others interpreted in the same manner.

And this is how many of Israel’s eminent Torah scholars conducted themselves when not engaged in leadership positions. Hillel the Elder, before being appointed Nasi, was a woodcutter. Shimon Pakuli dealt in flax and wool, and Rabbi Yochanan Hasandlar made a living by sewing sandals. Rabbi Meir was a scribe, Rav Pappa planted trees, as well as many others (cited in *Teshuvot Tashbetz*, 147).

The custom of the rabbis was to live modestly, and thus, in a relatively short time, provided for themselves.

Indeed, rabbis appointed to leadership roles received their livelihood honorably from the community. But most rabbis worked for their livelihood, and after their daily work, as well as on Shabbats and Festivals, they taught Torah to students, and answered queries.

When the number of students proliferated, and the rabbi lacked the time to both work and teach them all, they would ask him to curtail his labor, and instead, teach Torah to the students, paying him a “sekhar batala,” (payment to refrain from doing other things), in other words, the amount he lost by teaching students instead of working (see Ran, Nedarim 37a, ‘ve’le’inyan halakha’).

The Need to Support Torah Scholars

However, over the generations, a difficult problem arose. Study material increased greatly, and the rabbis who were able on the one hand to cover the entire Torah in iyun (in-depth analysis) and bekiut (broad familiarity with large swaths of data), and on the other hand, make a decent living, dwindled. Ultimately, almost all agreed that if communities would not provide for the rabbis (even those not occupying leadership roles), the Jewish people would have almost no Torah scholars left. Thus, salaries were instituted for rabbis, Torah teachers and educators, and it was even agreed that students training for rabbinic and teaching positions would receive a stipend so they could grow in Torah knowledge (see Teshuvot, Vol.1, 142-147; BY, Rema YD 246:21; Marashal and Shach ibid).

Problems that Arose

However, since the livelihood of the rabbis was not regulated by the mitzvot of the Torah, such as the terumot and ma’asrot (tithes) to the Kohanim and Levites, or through formal rabbinic enactments, the need to provide for rabbis often led to the desecration of Torah, and desecration of God.

Consequently, Rambam (Maimonides) fiercely condemned the funding of Torah scholars (Laws of Talmud Torah 3:10): “Anyone who comes to the conclusion that he should involve himself in Torah study without doing work and derive his livelihood from charity, desecrates God’s name, dishonors the Torah, extinguishes the light of faith, brings evil upon himself, and forfeits the life of the world to come, for it is forbidden to derive benefit from the words of Torah in this world. Our Sages declared: “Whoever benefits from the words of Torah forfeits his life in the world.” Also, they commanded and declared: “Do not make them a crown to magnify oneself, nor an axe to chop with.” Also, they commanded and declared: “Love work and despise rabbinic positions. All Torah that is not accompanied by work will eventually be negated and lead to sin. Ultimately, such a person will steal from others.”

However, only exceptionally gifted individuals, such as Rambam, could support themselves by a craft, and at the same, time teach Torah and instruct halakha. Thus, for lack

of any other option, despite the grief and humiliation, communities had to provide for rabbis, else they could not maintain Torah amongst the Jewish nation.

The ‘Sefat Emet’s’ Guidance against Rabbinical Office Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Lieb Alter (1847-1905), the author of ‘Sefat Emet’, who led Polish Jewry’s largest and foremost Gur Hasidut for about thirty-five years, guided his Hasidic rabbis to prefer earning their living through a craft or commerce over the rabbinate. Apparently, the flattery sometimes involved in attaining and working in a rabbinic office was not to his liking, and he therefore often shunned obtaining rabbinical posts in a manner that was not pure and clean.

Once, a disciple of his who was a Torah scholar, asked if he should take up a community’s rabbinate. He replied: “I would be more jealous of you had you become a shoemaker.” Sometime later, that same rabbi came to him, and presented the Rebbe a pair of shoes he had made with his own hands.

On another occasion, one of his enthusiastic Hasidim strove to obtain for a Gur Hasid the post of rabbi in the Warsaw community. When he had nearly attained his goal, he came to receive the Rebbe’s approval for the appointment. But the Rebbe shrugged his shoulders in a motion of dismissal, signifying that striving for this was unimportant. Boldly, the Hasid asked: “Who then will be the rabbis?” The Rebbe replied: “Those who don’t ask me!”

Not Making a Living from Torah

The ‘Sefat Emet’ was accustomed to subsist on very little, and not benefit at all from his Hasidim’s money. His wife sold tobacco, which provided their livelihood. Once, when one of their sons fell ill and was in mortal danger, his wife, the Rebbetzin, came to him and said: “You help everyone through your prayers – why not our son!?” He replied: “Let us closely examine the matter. Perhaps we benefited in any way from the Hasidim.” The Rebbetzin admitted that once, when in dire straits, she received some help from a Hasid. He said to her: ‘Return what you took, and accept upon yourself never to benefit from the Hasidim again at all, and we will have no more heartache raising children’ (From the book on the ‘Sefat Emet’ by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bromberg z”l’).

The Vision and Rectification for Now

In the final analysis, the ideal situation would be synagogues having rabbis who will teach Torah and provide comprehensive religious guidance to the community, and as compensation, receive an orderly salary, according to known reasonable standards. This would not bring desecration, rather, sanctification of God. Still, since this does not seem imminent, I proposed returning to the basics, and growing from there. The basis is that Torah scholars of the Jewish nation are commanded to teach Torah for free, the public is commanded to honor

its teachers, and with no other alternative, these will be the synagogue rabbis.

In other words, Torah scholars already earning their living (usually from teaching), who in any case attend synagogue daily for Shacharit, Mincha, and Maariv, and to set times for Torah study – should be the ones asked to sit up front in the ‘Mizrah’ (“eastern wall”), give regular daily lessons, and deliver sermons and Torah classes on Shabbat and Festivals.

Through this, many will come to understand the importance of community rabbis’ role, and find a way to arrange a salary for them, at least as *sekhar batala*. This will enable them to fulfill their role more successfully, enhancing Torah study for adults, youth and children, for regular synagogue attendees, and those who come only rarely, for the glory of Torah, the Nation, and the Land.

Teachers’ Status

Incidentally, praise is due to the representatives of the Ministry of Finance and Education and Yaffa Ben-David, the Secretary General of the Teachers’ Union, for reaching a salary agreement last year that greatly improves the salaries of teachers, especially new ones. They have thereby progressed in the right direction, encouraging young people’s joining the educational system. The agreement stipulated an additional salary of about 1,500 shekels per month for new teachers, while the most veteran get less than 100 shekels more monthly. Thus, in practice, from next year a beginning teacher working as a homeroom teacher at full-time, will earn 10,000 shekels per month, while the most veteran will receive approximately 19,000 shekels for this work. This comes in addition to ample benefits, such as vacation pay, etc.

It is important to mention this, because many people think teachers’ salaries are considerably lower than they actually are. Thus, young, idealistic people who would be willing to dedicate themselves to the sacred work of education prefer to pursue other professions, thinking they cannot support a family through teaching. The reality, though, is better.

Let’s hope that the Teachers Union also acts in this spirit, caring especially for beginning teachers, because the gap between the veterans and the beginners is too vast (by international standards), and education’s future depends on young people entering the field.

We should also hope that in the future, teachers’ pay and status will continue rising, so that the best and most suitable candidates will join the educational system, since our future depends on it.

This is not a far-fetched hope, for it appears that as the years pass, practical and technological work will increasingly be done by computers, and the public will grasp that investing in education is most important, for it is through education that students become better, more moral, wiser, and more creative. This, of course, will also be reflected in the overall investment in the educational system, and rise in teachers’ wages. Then, the Torah

scholars among them, will also be able to serve as synagogue rabbis. “The finest to education”!

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Shabbat Shalom: Nitzavim-Vayelech (Deuteronomy 29:9- 31:30)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “For this commandment that I have commanded you today is not concealed from you, nor is it far away.” (Deuteronomy 30:11)

How often it is that we and people we know say, “I can’t help it. It’s in my nature to get angry.” Or, perhaps most commonly, “I give up. I’ll never be able to go on a diet and keep the weight off.” At this time of year, perhaps more than at any other time, we wrestle with issues such as these brought to our attention as a result of deep introspection.

The great 19th century scholar Rabbi Yisrael Salanter noted, “It is easier to learn the entire Talmud than to change one character trait.” Indeed, can we change? Is a particular trait part and parcel of human nature, built into our personality, seemingly impossible to overcome?

Judaism, with its emphatic message of freedom of choice, insists on our ability to change. But is it really fair to ask individuals to do what may very well be beyond their ability to achieve? Do we really have the power to overcome our most potent and persistent weaknesses? To what extent can we take into account the human difficulty in overcoming one’s weakness?

Our Torah portion, Nitzavim, emphatically insists on the possibility of change, no matter the circumstances: “I have set before you so that you will consider in your heart, among all the nations where the Lord your God has banished you. And you shall return to the Lord your God and obey His voice” (ibid., v. 1–2).

And once a person has begun the process of teshuva, God Himself – aware of the almost insuperable difficulty of changing one’s nature and overcoming one’s inherent weakness – steps in and completes the process on behalf of the penitent: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your seed to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live” (v.6).

From the perspective of the Holy Zohar, the mystical interpretation of the Bible, this is the difference between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashana falls on the first day of the month of Tishrei, when the moon – a symbol of God’s light and grace – is hidden and barely visible. The individual approaches the synagogue in fearful and trembling anticipation, hopeful but not at all certain that he can pierce through the veil of darkness covering the heaven and masking over the moon.

Ten days later, on Yom Kippur, the moon glows briefly, imbuing the heavens with renewed light and hope. The individual is then ecstatically reborn, cleansed,

transformed, and purified by the grace of Divine love and forgiveness.

Indeed, we repeat again and again throughout the penitential prayers of the Day of Atonement the words of the prophet Ezekiel: “And I shall sprinkle upon you the purifying waters and you shall be purified...and I shall give you a new heart, and a new spirit shall I place in your midst” (36:25–26).

We can thus appreciate anew the enormous power of Yom Kippur, the one day during the year when the Almighty grants us not only forgiveness, but also the renewed inner strength to overcome our inborn weaknesses and foibles.

And we also may better understand the terse interpretation of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk on the verse immediately following the command – as well as our ability – to repent after one has transgressed: “For this commandment that I have commanded you today is not...far away from you” (ibid., 30:11). Says the Kotzker, “It requires only one small turn (Yiddish: nur ein kleine dreier).”

What he apparently meant was that the penitent is expected only to make a change in direction, to turn his back on his temptations and begin to embrace God and His Torah.

We return to our original question: can we change? The simple answer is yes. However, it is incumbent upon the would-be penitent making the all-important first step. At that point, the Almighty will give him a hand to help him complete the journey, as the Sages taught, “One who comes to be purified receives Divine assistance” (Talmud Yoma 38b).

And at the end of Yom Kippur, after a day of pleading with God for forgiveness and atonement, we cry out in the Ne’ila prayer: “Your right hand is extended to accept the penitent!”, reminding us that when returning to God, we are never alone.

Shabbat Shalom

Writing a Sefer Torah

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Double Torah?

Mr. Yoreish would like to know: “My late father owned a sefer Torah, which is now mine. Do I have a mitzvah to write another sefer Torah?”

Question #2: Special Birthday Present

“My father’s friends want to surprise him with a very special birthday gift -- a sefer Torah. Someone told me that if they do this, my father will not fulfill the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah. Is this true?”

Question #3: Torah Online

Encyclopedia Brownstein asks: “Now that anyone can purchase access to thousands of seforim online, am I required to purchase these services so that I can study from them?”

Introduction:

The last of the 613 mitzvos of the Torah, as counted by the Sefer Hachinuch, requires each male Jew to write a sefer Torah (Sanhedrin 21b). This is derived from the posuk, Ve’ata kisvu lochem es hashirah hazos velamdo es bnei Yisroel (Devorim 31:19), which is understood by Chazal to mean: “And now, write for yourself a sefer Torah that includes this song [that begins with the word Ha’azinu] and [with this Torah] teach the Children of Israel” (see Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:1).

A sefer Torah must be written with utmost accuracy. There are myriads of laws that govern how the parchment must be prepared and how the letters and words must be written. Each word must be spelled exactly the way it is spelled in that place in our sifrei Torah, notwithstanding that certain letters, such as vav and yud, are at times included and in other places omitted. Extensive rules govern the spacing of the letters and words, and even how the parchments of the sefer Torah are sewn together.

The columns of the sefer Torah must be straight and neat, and the places that are to be written as poems, such as Az Yoshir and the song of Ha’azinu, must be written in a special way, which the Gemara (Megillah 16b) calls ari’ach al gabei leveinah, literally, “a half brick on top of a brick” - - the lines alternate in a pattern somewhat reminiscent of the way bricks are used in construction. If these poems are not written this way, the sefer Torah is not kosher (Shabbos 103b).

No Chapters

There are no chapter headings in a sefer Torah and no breaks to delineate the beginnings and ends of chapters or pesukim. Furthermore, a sefer Torah does not have any musical notes or signs, usually called taamei hamikra (in Hebrew) or trop (in Yiddish), to show the baal keriyah how to chant the passage. The only punctuation in the sefer Torah are two types of paragraph endings, one called pesuchah, literally, “open” and the other called sesumah, “closed.” The Rambam and the Rosh disagree what is the correct way to demarcate these stops. Since a sefer Torah in which a pesuchah appears like a sesumah or vice versa is invalid (Shabbos 103b), this dispute complicates writing a sefer Torah that is kosher according to all opinions. To avoid this problem, the accepted practice is that pesuchos or sesumos are never begun towards the end of a line or at its beginning. Since both the Rambam and the Rosh agree how to create a pesuchah or a sesumah that falls in the middle of a line, we always write sifrei Torah in such a way that all pesuchah or sesumah endings fall out this way. This is one of the reasons why sofrim use copies of a tikun or a photocopy of a sefer Torah to guarantee that the pesuchos and sesumos of the sefer Torah always end up in the middle of a line, which avoids the above-mentioned halachic dispute. (The dispute between the Rambam and the Rosh concerning how to make pesuchos and sesumos also affects the laws of how to write tefillin and mezuzos, but this is not our topic.)

Female Sofros

Women are exempt from the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah, just as they are exempt from the mitzvah of studying Torah (Rambam; Sefer Hachinuch; however, see Shaagas Aryeh #35 who opines that women are obligated to write a sefer Torah. However, at the end of #36, the Shaagas Aryeh concludes that women are not obligated to write a sefer Torah, but for a different reason than that cited by the Rambam.) Most authorities rule that one cannot fulfill the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah with one written by a woman (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 281:3); however, Derishah (Yoreh Deah 281:1) concludes that one does fulfill the mitzvah with a sefer Torah written by a woman.

The King

The Jewish king is required to write or arrange the writing of an additional sefer Torah; aside from one that he wrote before he became king, he is required to write another sefer Torah after he becomes king (Sanhedrin 21b; Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:2). His new sefer Torah is checked by the Beis Din Hagadol for accuracy by comparing it to the sefer Torah kept in the Beis Hamikdash that was written by Moshe Rabbeinu (Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:2). The new sefer Torah follows him constantly, even when he eats and holds court (Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:2). The only time it is not in his presence is when he sleeps, bathes or uses the comfort facilities (Rambam, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:2). If the king had no sefer Torah before he became king, he writes two sifrei Torah.

Inherited a Torah

Mr. Yoreish would like to know: "My late father owned a sefer Torah, which is now mine. Do I have a mitzvah to write another sefer Torah?"

To quote the words of the Gemara: Even though someone's ancestors left a sefer Torah, it is a mitzvah to write one on his own (Sanhedrin 21b). The authorities disagree whether this means that one who inherited a sefer Torah did not fulfill the mitzvah, or whether it means that there is an additional mitzvah to write one's own sefer Torah, notwithstanding that owning the inherited sefer Torah fulfilled the mitzvah.

The Sefer Hachinuch explains that writing a new sefer Torah increases the number and availability of sifrei Torah, which is why the Torah requires everyone to write his own. Furthermore, it is usually easier and more enjoyable to study from a more recently written Torah. Owning one's own sefer Torah facilitates studying Torah – one who owns a sefer Torah may study it whenever he has time, since he does not need to find a sefer Torah that is not being used.

Writing It Yourself

Someone who hires a sofer to write a sefer Torah fulfills the mitzvah, although it is more praiseworthy for someone to write the sefer Torah himself (Sefer Hachinuch). One who purchases a sefer Torah... is like grabbing a mitzvah from the market. If he wrote it himself, the Torah treats it

as if he himself received the Torah directly from Har Sinai. Rav Sheishes said: if he corrected even one letter, it is considered as if he wrote it (Menachos 30a). Thus, someone who hired a sofer to write a sefer Torah should have one letter left unwritten, which the donor writes himself, thereby fulfilling the mitzvah, as if he wrote the whole Torah. It is important to note that the letter should be left unwritten, or at least not written sufficiently to be kosher. Common practice is that the sofer writes an outline of the last letter and leaves for donors and honorees only to fill in the outline. However, the sefer Torah is kosher even when letters are merely outlined; therefore, halachically, the sofer completed the sefer Torah, not the donor, who has therefore not fulfilled the mitzvah of writing the sefer Torah himself.

Special Birthday Present

At this point, let us should discuss one of our opening questions: My father's friends want to surprise him with a very special birthday gift -- a sefer Torah. Someone told me that if they do this, my father will not fulfill the mitzvah of arranging the writing of a sefer Torah. Is this true?

The question here is if receiving a Torah as a present is similar to inheriting a sefer Torah. According to all authorities, this is not the ideal way to fulfill the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah, and, according to many, one does not fulfill it at all.

However, if the friends involved are careful, they can help their birthday boy fulfill his mitzvah. All they need to do is not complete the sefer Torah, but present it to him with one letter not yet written. If he can write the letter himself, he fulfills the mitzvah in its most optimal way. If he cannot, but he hires a sofer to write the last letter, he has certainly fulfilled the mitzvah. A third option is to have the sofer write the entire sefer but leave a letter incomplete in a way that it is not valid, and teach father how to connect the broken parts of the letter in a way that makes the letter, and thereby the sefer Torah, kosher.

Lost Torah

If someone's sefer Torah was lost or stolen, does he lose his mitzvah?

It is always tragic when a sefer Torah is stolen or damaged in a fire or flood. Our question is whether the owner of a sefer Torah that he can no longer use now becomes required again to fulfill the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah. The question can be explained as follows: Is the mitzvah the writing of a Torah, or is it to be in possession of a Torah that one wrote (or arranged its writing)?

This question is the subject of a dispute among the later authorities (the Acharonim), some contending that once a person has written a sefer Torah, he has now fulfilled the mitzvah, even in the event that it was destroyed or lost afterwards, whereas others rule that, in such cases, the owner is required to write a new sefer Torah (Pischei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah 270:3).

Donating a Torah

Most people who own sifrei Torah do not keep it in their homes, but, instead, lend it to a shul that uses it. Is it preferred that one loan the Torah to a shul or donate it?

Rabbi Akiva Eiger rules that one should not donate a sefer Torah to the community, because one thereby loses his mitzvah of owning a sefer Torah (quoting Toras Chayim Sanhedrin 21, also quoted in Pischei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah 270:3). Rabbi Akiva Eiger understands that the mitzvah is to own the sefer Torah.

Selling a Sefer Torah

As a rule of thumb, one may not sell a sefer Torah, since it is an item of kedushah. This is true, even if one already owns many sifrei Torah.

There are a few exceptional situations in which one is permitted to sell a sefer Torah, such as to provide the means with which to study Torah or to get married. The Rema adds that one may sell a sefer Torah for pidyon shevuyim, to redeem captives.

It is forbidden to sell an old sefer Torah in order to use the money to purchase a new one. However, some authorities permit selling an old sefer Torah, if the new sefer Torah that one wishes is already written and available for immediate purchase. In this instance, these authorities permit one to sell the old sefer Torah and immediately hand over the money to purchase the new sefer Torah (Levush, quoted by Shach, Yoreh Deah 270:3). However, the Shach concludes that, even in this situation, it is forbidden to sell an old Torah in order to buy a new one. The dispute between the two opinions is whether one may sell an item of sanctity in order to purchase an item of equal sanctity.

When it is forbidden to sell an old Torah for a new one, it is similarly prohibited to sell a sefer Torah that one inherited in order to use the proceeds to be able to write or purchase a new one. The Chasam Sofer, who rules this way, reasons that since there is no increased kedushah in the new sefer Torah over the old one, there is no legitimate halachic basis to sell the old one (Shu"t Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah 254, quoted in Pischei Teshuvah, Yoreh Deah 270:6).

It would seem that if the old one is posul, it would be permitted to sell it to someone who will repair it and return it to use, in order to use the money to purchase a new kosher one. This is because the new one has greater kedushah than does the old one, which is posul.

Acquiring Other Seforim

Is the purpose of the mitzvah of owning a sefer Torah to make sure that one has works of Torah from which to study, or is the mitzvah simply that everyone should actually write his own sefer Torah? The Rosh (Halachos Katanos, Hilchos Sefer Torah, Chapter 1:1) writes that, since no one today uses a sefer Torah for studying, the mitzvah is the acquisition of seforim, such as chumashim, mishnayos, Gemaras, and their commentaries that are used for study. The Beis Yosef (Yoreh Deah, end of 270)

explains that the Rosh does not mean that there is no longer a mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah. In the Beis Yosef's opinion, the Rosh also agrees that the primary mitzvah remains to write a sefer Torah. What the Rosh contends is that one fulfills the mitzvah also by acquiring seforim. This approach to understanding the Rosh is followed by several other early authorities (Levush; Bach; Tosafos Yom Tov).

However, the Tur implies that the Rosh means that there is no mitzvah today of writing a sefer Torah, and this approach is expressed explicitly by the Perishah. In their opinion, the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah exists only to study from it, and when one will not use the sefer Torah for study, there is no mitzvah to write one, but, instead, the mitzvah is to acquire materials that will be used for Torah study. Notwithstanding the opinions of the Tur and the Perishah to the contrary, the Taz concludes that we should follow the Beis Yosef's understanding that writing a sefer Torah remains a requirement even today.

There is a third approach to explaining the view of the Rosh, that of the Shaagas Aryeh. He rejects the approach that the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah exists only to study from it, but, rather, accepts the Beis Yosef's understanding that there is a mitzvah of writing the Torah for its own sake. The Shaagas Aryeh proves that this must be true because otherwise why, in the era of the Gemara, was someone who inherited a sefer required to write one, when he could have used his inherited Torah for study? This implies that there is a mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah, independent of the need to have means with which to study Torah.

The Shaagas Aryeh notes that the Gemara (Kiddushin 30a) states that we are no longer experts on the correct spelling of all the words in a sefer Torah. On this basis, the Shaagas Aryeh #36 rules that from the time when the amora'im of the Gemara realized that we no longer know the correct spelling of the Torah, we are not required min hatorah to write a sefer Torah, since we may be spelling some of the words incorrectly. However, at the time of the Gemara, there was still a rabbinic requirement to write a sefer Torah to make certain that there were enough sifrei Torah and seforim in existence for people to study. This rabbinic requirement existed as long as people still used sifrei Torah for study. The Rosh is contending that once sifrei Torah are no longer used for study, there is no mitzvah to write sifrei Torah but, instead, the rabbinic mitzvah becomes the acquisition of seforim with which to study.

At this point we can address the question raised above by Encyclopedia Brownstein: Now that one can purchase the ability to access thousands of seforim on the computer, am I required to purchase these services so that I can study from these seforim?"

It would seem to me that since one can purchase the materials he needs to study in the old, bound format, this is not required. However, if one feels that his study of Torah is hampered by not having access to all the seforim that one

can now access via a computer, it would seem that Brownstein's suggestion may have merit. I'll leave this question for Encyclopedia to discuss with his posek.

Conclusion

According to all approaches we have cited, there is a correlation between the mitzvah of writing a sefer Torah, that of studying Torah, and the requirement to live the entirety of our lives according to Torah and within the parameters established by the Torah. Certainly, this is the most befitting way for the Torah to close its listing of the mitzvos: with a mitzvah whose purpose is to sustain us, so that we conduct our lives in full accordance with the Torah's guidelines.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Netzavim

To Life!

Many difficult choices face us daily. Some are seemingly insignificant, and some are critical. Those choices require deep and careful analysis and we hope against hope that we make the correct decision. There is one choice, however, that any fool can make. It is the choice of life. Yet the Torah commands us this week that when faced with the choice of life or death it is incumbent upon us to choose life. "See — I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil... and you shall choose life, so that you will live — you and your offspring," Deuteronomy 30:15-19

The Torah is filled with 613 Mitzvos. Each and every one of them is imparted to us with a sense of urgency. We are commanded to observe the minor laws with the same fervor as the major ones. Yet the Torah is not content with its charge to keep individual commandments. It culls all the laws under the title of "life" and then commissions us with an additional Mitzvah — "choose life." Isn't the objective of this command another angle in which we are again prodded to observe all that has already been commanded? Why does the Torah repeat its original charges as one summary command? Why aren't the original 613 sufficient? It is fascinating to note that in the entire Torah there is no overt reference to Olam Haboh — the world to come. To scoffers, it holds another opportunity to dismiss one of the greatest tenets of Jewish Faith. There are only veiled allusions to our *raison d'être* the world of eternity. Why?

The entire Oral Law, Mishnah, Talmud, etc., is replete with the concept of the world to come. The Sages in Pirkei Avos, explain that, "this world is just a corridor for the world to come. One must prepare himself in the hallway before entering the palace." If this great world was offered orally, why is it not openly discussed in the text of the Torah? I once heard that the Torah, unlike other religious documents, is telling us, "I am not only promising to deliver a reward in a place you can't understand. If you

fulfill my commandments, I promise reward in this very world!" Hashem guarantees reward in this world. The world to come will be beyond our comprehension but this world will hold more than enough gratification when we act in accordance with his will.

Reb Ahron Kotler of blessed memory, epitomized a life steeped in Torah study. After escaping the ravages of World War II, he established the Kollel (fellowship program) of Beth Medrash Govoah, at Lakewood, New Jersey. It is there that married scholars studied Torah day and night and received a small stipend. After two years of Kollel study one aspiring prodigy had a lucrative business opportunity in which he was guaranteed a very substantial living. He approached Reb Ahron. "Rebbe, is it true that if a businessman supports a Torah scholar in a contractual arrangement, then he shares the reward of the world to come with his partner? Reb Ahron answered in the affirmative, explaining the concept of Yissachar-Zevulun partnership. (Zevulun was a merchant and his brother, Yissachar, was a sage. They entered a business arrangement to share equally both financial and spiritual rewards.) "If that is the case," the student continued "I'd like to enter into an arrangement with a Kollel member. You see, Rebbe, I have a wonderful opportunity to make quite a bit of money and this way I'll still be guaranteed the world to come." Reb Ahron was stunned. "How can you leave learning?" The student responded meekly. "But won't I still enjoy the world to come?"

"Of course!" exclaimed the Rosh Yeshiva, "but if you leave learning, how will you enjoy this world?"

Reb Ahron understood this week's Torah's message to its fullest extent. Observance of Mitzvos is not just a life of extended ritual observance. It is life itself. The Torah has laid a path that if followed precisely will guarantee years of happiness. It will guarantee the ability to overcome perceived suffering. It will guarantee a certain sense of fulfillment way beyond any material gain. The Torah declares, "if you choose a life of Torah, you are not only selecting a set of rituals. You are choosing much more than Tefillin, Mezuzah and Shofar. You are choosing a sum total greater than all of its parts. You are choosing life!"

Good Shabbos

Mordechai Kamenetzky – Yeshiva of South Shore

Reb Ahron Kotler (1892-1962) was the Rosh Yeshiva of Kletzk, Poland. After his escape from Europe during World War II he established Beth Medrash Govoah in Lakewood New Jersey. Reb Ahron was a prime force in the establishment of the day school movement in America as well as a Torah Educational system in Israel.

Nitzavim-Vayelech 5783

Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz

Tripartite Forgiveness (Nitzavim-Vayelech)

God pardons like a mother, who kisses the offense into everlasting forgiveness. -Henry Ward Beecher

In one of Moses' last speeches to Israel, he declares that "You are standing today, all of you, before your God." The Bat Ayin on Deuteronomy 29:9 explains that when Moses is saying "today" he is referring to Rosh Hashana, the start of the Jewish calendar year.

The Bat Ayin then quotes a midrash from Vayikra Rabah 30:7 that states that God forgives the nation of Israel in three different stages. He forgives a third of our sins on the eve of Rosh Hashana, He forgives a second-third of our sins during the Ten Days of Repentance (from Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur), and He forgives the third-third of our sins on Hoshana Rabbah (the penultimate day of Sukkot).

The Bat Ayin wonders as to the timing and significance of Rosh Hashana eve, the Ten Days of Repentance (which includes the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) and Hoshana Rabbah. He explains that each stage of forgiveness is for different types of sin. The first stage is for the sin of illicit relations. The second stage is for sins of theft. The third stage is for gossiping.

He elaborates that God first forgives the sin of illicit relations because He wants the world to start the new year with a clean slate in that department. There is something fundamental about the sin of illicit relations that otherwise prevents repentance in all other matters, both for the individual, but also for the world at large. That's why it's forgiven on the eve of Rosh Hashana.

During the Ten Days of Repentance, God forgives for the sin of theft, which is understood to be widespread. It is not only an absolution for bank robbers. It is for all types of theft, big and small. Whether it's theft of money, theft of items, theft of time. It includes misappropriating someone's investment of time, effort, resources, trust, confidence. How many times have we failed a friend or loved one? How many times did we "steal" their trust? How many times did we say we'd do something and didn't do it – always for legitimate reasons, but we nonetheless proved that it wasn't important enough for us. That too is a theft and is the main forgiveness God grants through the period of the High Holidays.

The final forgiveness is given on Hoshana Rabbah. The Kabbalists explain that it is the day when whatever decrees were written and signed during the High Holiday are finally sealed and delivered for the year, so to speak. And it is reserved for the most pervasive, perhaps the most rampant sin of all. Gossip. And God forgives us of this and of all these sins with just one simple condition (besides seeking forgiveness directly from the injured party where possible). Remorse. We must regret and feel remorse for these failings of character and make a serious, concerted effort to reduce if not outright remove these defects from our interpersonal relationships.

May we appreciate and take advantage of the fresh start and opportunities of a New Year.

Shabbat Shalom and Ktiva Ve'chatima Tova,
Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the memory of Rabbi Charles Meisels z"l. May his family be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

Parsha Insights

By Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

Parshas Netzavim

Can the Sun Just Not Rise?

This week we read Parshas Nitzavim, quickly followed by the holiday of Rosh Hashana two days later. In our parsha, on the last day of his life, Moshe gathers together all of Bnei Yisroel for a final initiation into the bris {covenant} with Hashem. He warns to be very vigilant with idol worship and describes the destruction Hashem will send upon Eretz Yisroel if we don't follow the way of Hashem.

"Ha'e'dosi va'chem ha'yome es hashamayim v'es ha'aretz {I bring the heavens and earth as witnesses today} ha'chaim v'ha'mavess nasati l'fanecha ha'b'racha v'ha'k'lala {I have placed before you (the choice of) life and death, blessing and curse} u'va'charta ba'chaim {you should choose life} l'ma'an tich'ye atah v'zar'e'cha {in order that you and your children will live} [30:19]."

What testimony is being brought by the heavens and earth? Rashi explains that, in the future, when evil will befall us, the heavens and earth will testify that we had been warned.

Rashi then quotes the Sifri which offers an additional explanation. Hashem is calling upon Bnei Yisroel: "Look at the heavens that I created to serve you, have they deviated from their prescribed path? Has the sun ever missed a day and not risen from the east to illuminate the world? Look at the earth that I created to serve you, has it ever deviated from its prescribed pattern? Have wheat seeds ever produced barley? If they who don't receive reward or punishment haven't deviated from their ordained paths, you Bnei Yisroel, who do receive reward for obeying and do get punished for transgressing, certainly should adhere to your ordained path."

The Be'er Yosef is troubled by this Sifri. How can Hashem compare the roles of heaven and earth to that of man? The state and purpose of the heavens and earth has remained the same from the time of creation until today. They are supposed to be doing the same exact things day in and day out. Man's obligations, on the other hand, are constantly changing from moment to moment depending on the situations in which he finds himself. Furthermore, based on this constant change of circumstances, there have been people through the generations who have claimed that since the world has changed, the Torah as we have it is no longer applicable...

He explains in the following way. Chaza”l reveal that the first word of the Torah — B’reishis {In the beginning}— alludes to the very purpose of creation. The world was created for the sake of the Torah that is called ‘reishis’ and for the sake of Yisroel who are also called ‘reishis’. Yisroel, through the instructions of the Torah, would fulfill the purpose of creation. The Torah was the blueprint through which the world was created. Every detail of the world was created in the precise way that it was, in order to create the proper environment in which the Torah would be fulfilled.

When we look at the heavens and earth, we must remember that they were created to enable us to serve Hashem. The fact that there has been no change in them is testimony that there has also been no change in the applicability of the Torah and in our ability to observe its teachings. The All-Knowing and Eternal G-d was well aware of all of the changes that the world would go through. The heavens and earth were summoned as testimony that the eternal Torah will always apply to us.

As the days of Rosh Hashana approach, we must keep in mind the second half of the passuk we quoted above: “I have placed before you (the choice of) life and death, blessing and curse — you should choose life! [30:19].”

The Akeidas Yitzchak illustrates this with a penetrating parable.

A certain king had three sons whom he wanted to appoint to prominent positions. However, the law of that country dictated that before a person could be appointed to such a rank, he had to have proven his wisdom. The king therefore advised his sons to travel for a few years, gather wisdom and then he’d summon them to return.

The three brothers set off. As they drew near to a distant island, they discerned an incredibly beautiful and elaborate orchard. They decided to drop anchor and to investigate. At the entrance of the orchard sat three men. One was a very old man. The second was a person who suffered from terrible bodily afflictions. The third, the wisest of the three, had a pure and brilliant glow emanating from his face.

As they were entering, each of these three men turned to them and offered advice. The first one told them: “Know that you cannot remain in the orchard forever.” The second one warned them: “You can eat what you want but you can’t take anything with you.” The third one advised them: “When you eat from the fruits, stay away from the bad fruits — only choose the good ones.”

Upon entering the garden, they were mesmerized by the sight and scent of magnificent plants, trees and flowers. As they continued in further, they came across beautiful fountains and springs which comprised a very elaborate irrigation system. The wisdom that had gone into the planning of this orchard was quite evident. As they continued even further, they came to different mines of gold and precious gems.

At first, the three brothers stayed together, enjoying the fruits and the beauty of the orchard. After a few days they split up with each involving himself in his particular interest. One became totally involved in the delicious fruits that were available there, spending his days eating and drinking. Another decided to involve himself in what he considered to be a more worthwhile pursuit and spent his days gathering gold and gems.

The third brother was not interested in the path of the other two. He instead spent his time delving into the wonders of this orchard. The more he probed, the clearer it became to him that incredible wisdom had gone into the planning and planting of this orchard. He began to search for some sign of who had made this orchard. He came across some texts written by the designer which further testified to the genius of that individual. He spent his days gathering as much wisdom as he could. He’d taste the different fruits and admire the gems but his energy was devoted to acquiring an understanding of the designer through understanding what he’d built.

Time passed and the awaited message came from their father, the king — it was time to return home. They hurried to leave the orchard and to begin their return voyage.

The first brother had become so accustomed to the sweet pleasures of the orchard that he was unable to live without them. He never made it back to his father’s country.

The second son tried to carry out the fortune he had amassed. The heavy work and sleepless nights from his obsession with riches had taken their toll. He looked like a broken man, not like a prince. To add insult to injury, as he had been warned before he entered, all of the wealth that he tried to take with him was confiscated.

The third brother left filled with excitement. This was the day he was longing for. He could now show his father all the wisdom that he had gained.

The two remaining brothers reached the palace. The guards recognized the third brother and gave him a princely welcome. The second brother was unrecognizable and was not allowed to enter. The king sat with his son, delighted in the wisdom he had gained, and prepared a seat for him amongst the leading officers of the kingdom.

The three sons represent mankind being sent to this world. Upon arrival one receives three warnings. Adom Harishon warns him: You were formed from earth and to earth you will return. Iyov {Job} admonishes: You were born naked and that’s how you’ll return. Moshe exhorts: Choose life...

In the Rosh Hashana prayers we say: Remember us for life, O King Who desires (us to have) life and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, O Living G-d.

In order to honestly ask Hashem for life, we must first make the decision to choose life.

Good Shabbos and a k’siva v’chasima tova,
Yisroel Ciner

This week’s parsha-insights is dedicated in mazel tov to Howie Hershkovich and Martha Vays in honor of their

upcoming wedding. May they be zocheh to much happiness together and to build a bayis ne'eman b'Yisroel.

Parshat Nitzavim

by **Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair** -
www.seasonsofthemoon.com

PARSHA OVERVIEW

On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers all the people, young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women, in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations yet unborn. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship, because despite having witnessed the abominations of Egypt, there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality.

Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel that will result from failure to heed Hashem's mitzvahs. Both their descendants and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all — that the Jewish People have forsaken the One Who protects them, in favor of powerless idols. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. And, however assimilated they will have become among the nations, Hashem will eventually bring them back to the Land of Israel. Moshe tells the people to remember that the Torah is not a remote impossibility, but rather that its fulfillment is within the grasp of every Jew. This Torah portion concludes with a dramatic choice between life and death, with Moshe exhorting the people to choose life.

PARSHA INSIGHTS

Stand Up and Be Counted

“You are standing today...” (29:9)

As modern culture seems to increasingly anesthetize the inherent morality of humanity, a Jew needs to stand up and be counted. As society at large is held to ransom by an autocracy of pseudo-intellectuals whose views are based on little more than their own virtue-signaling and a desperate scramble not to be seen as un-enlightened, we who champion the immutable values of the Torah need to stand up and be counted.

The Chafetz Chaim once said to Rabbi Shimon Schwab, “Do you know why I am a Kohen and you are not?” Rabbi Schwab said, ‘Because your father was a Kohen and your grandfather was a Kohen.’ “Okay, so why was my grandfather a Kohen?” Before waiting for Rabbi Schwab to answer, the Chafetz Chaim explained, “I am a Kohen because three and half thousand years ago, at the scene of the Golden Calf, when Moshe Rabbeinu called out, ‘Who is for Hashem? To Me!’ – my great-great-grandfather ran and heeded the call to be counted with Moshe and our holy Torah.”

Today, how do we answer the call of “Who is for Hashem? To Me!” How do we stand up and be counted? When we stand bigger and stronger than temptation. When we turn our heads away, we heed the call.

When we do this, we experience a moment that is totally between us and Hashem, a private moment that no one else will ever know about. The Midrash says on the verse in Mishlei, “My son, give Me your heart and your eyes...” — “The Holy One says, ‘If you give Me your heart and your eyes, I know that you are Mine.’”

When we guard our eyes, when we raise our eyes and minds from temptation and look to Hashem – He knows that we are His. We have answered the call of “Who is for Hashem? To Me!” We are standing up and are counted.

Office of the Chief Rabbi Mirvis

D'var Torah: Nitzavim Vayelech

What is the significance of every single letter of the Torah? The Lubavitcher Rebbe gave a beautiful explanation. In Parshat Vayelech, which we'll be reading this coming Shabbat, the Torah presents us with the last of the Mitzvot. Mitzvah number 613 states “וְעָתָה כְּתַבּוּ לְכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה־הַזֹּאת וְעָתָה כְּתַבּוּ לְכֶם אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁירָה בְּפִיהֶם וְלִמְנָה אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁירָה בְּפִיהֶם” – and now, write for yourselves this song, which is the Torah, and teach it to the children of Israel. Place it in their mouths”.

Why is there a mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah? We can fulfil this Mitzvah by writing just one letter of a Sefer Torah and it's attributed to us as if we've written the whole Sefer. But why this imperative to be engaged in the writing of letters of the scroll?

The Rebbe explained, there is a Halacha which we learn from the Gemara in Mesechet Mechatot, Daf 29a. There Chazal tell us that all the letters must be “גויל מוקף – surrounded by blank parchment”. That is to say that no letter can be connected to any other letter. At the same time there is also a Halacha that each letter must be visibly part of its own word – and visibly separate from all other words.

Each letter represents an individual. The message of the letters of the Torah, is that each one of us should know that we are unique people. As a result, everyone should respect our own individuality, our unique nature and personality. At the same time, none of us should ever forget that we are an integral part of our nation and as a result, we have an ‘areivut’ – a responsibility, to selflessly care for others and reach out to them.

In addition, if one single letter of the Torah is ‘passul’ – rendered unfit, then the entire Sefer Torah is passul. From here we learn that if there is something with just one of us, then every single one of us is affected as a result.

This is such a beautiful message for us and so apposite on the eve of the commencement of Slichot – a time when we're just about to usher in a new year and when we're engaging in ‘Cheshbon Hanefesh’ – introspection.

At this time, therefore, let us never forget how important each and every one of us is and how we should develop ourselves and excel in our own personal way as individuals. At the same time, we should never forget that everybody depends on us and is looking for us to pull our weight for the sake of our nation and for the sake of the world.

Shabbat Shalom

Parshas Nitzavim-Vayelech

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Reuven ben Shaul.

Nation Corporation

You are standing here today, all of you, before Hashem your God; your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all of Yisroel (29:9).

This week's parsha opens with Moshe Rabbeinu addressing all of Bnei Yisroel. Rashi (ad loc) explains that this was the last day of his life and Moshe was "standing" for all of the people, i.e. permanently affixing Bnei Yisroel into a new covenant with Hashem. Moshe goes on to list all the different entities bound by this covenant (leaders, elders, officers, all the men, women, children, converts, etc.) and then adds "whoever is here standing with us today [...] and those that are not here today" (29:14). Rashi (ad loc) explains that this is referring to all future generations (that they too are to be bound by this covenant).

What is the nature of this new covenant? Furthermore, as the Maharal (Gur Aryeh 29:14) asks, "How is it possible to bind all future generations to it as well?" In other words, how does my oath obligate succeeding generations so that if they don't follow the terms of the covenant they will be punished?

At the end of last week's parsha Moshe Rabbeinu spoke to the entire nation as a whole, however, in this week's parsha Moshe begins by creating an entire infrastructure. What changed?

Until now, Bnei Yisroel was an association of tribes and families under the leadership of Moshe Rabbeinu. On the last day of his life, Moshe established the Jewish people as a corporate entity. Just as companies have individuals with different roles, so too Moshe created a hierarchy of leadership and responsibility.

In other words, the Jewish people were no longer just an associated group of people united by Moshe, but became a single entity with responsibility for each other and towards each other. Maimonides (Yad Hilchos Krias Shema 1:4) quotes a verse from this week's parsha to illustrate that the unity of God is dependent on its acceptance by the entirety of the Jewish people. To understand this on a deeper level: Everything in creation is a reflection of Hashem; thus the concept of the oneness of Hashem is articulated by the harmony and indivisibility of the Jewish people.

At this point the Jewish people are now viewed as a single entity, a corporate body, as it were. Just as within a body when one area is injured or incapacitated it affects the entirety of the body, so too we all affect each other. Rashi (29:28) explains that with this covenant we became guarantors for one another and thus we can be punished for the misdeeds of our brethren. Rashi ascertains this from the Gemara (Sanhedrin 27b), which states that Bnei Yisroel were made guarantors for one another.

On the surface, this guarantee is hard to understand. First, there is no consideration here, how is this a legally binding guarantee? Second, a guarantor is only responsible for monetary restitution; a guarantor cannot be physically punished for another's misdeeds.

The word that the Gemara uses is that the Jewish people are guarantors one with another – "ערבים זה בזה" (as opposed to one to another – "ערבים זה לזה"). This is also borne out by the word "ערב", which means blended (e.g. this is how a community "eruv" works, we are a blended whole and therefore permitted to carry). Thus, this law of being a guarantor is similar to a person's body, when one leg doesn't work properly then the other leg compensates. This obligation to guarantee or pay is because we are one unified, whole nation.

This is also why succeeding generations can be held responsible for the covenant. They are simply the next generation of cells in the ever-evolving corporate body of the Jewish people – an eternally unified nation.

Bringing Torah Down to Earth

I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in, and Hashem has told me you shall not cross this Jordan (31:2).

This week's parsha opens with Moshe addressing all of Bnei Yisroel on the last day of his life. Rashi (ad loc) explains "I can no longer go out and come in" as referring to "[going out and coming] in the words of the Torah. This teaches us that the knowledge handed down and the wellsprings of wisdom had become closed to him."

This means that on the last day of his life Moshe was no longer "connected" to the source of the Torah and its wisdom. The question is, why? Why was it necessary for Moshe to be closed off to the wisdom and wellsprings of Torah on the last day of his life?

In last week's parsha we find a remarkable statement, "This commandment that I command you today is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in the heavens [for you] to say, 'who will go up to the heavens and bring it down for us [...]' (30:11-12). While many commentators (Ramban ad loc etc.) understand this verse to be referring to the mitzvah of repentance, Rashi (ad loc) explains that this is referring to the Torah itself. Meaning if it was up in the heavens someone "would have to go up after it, and learn it" (Rashi 30:12).

What does Rashi mean by, “if the Torah was up in the sky somebody would have to ascend after it and study it to bring it down”?

Here we learn a fascinating lesson about our Torah: So long as Moshe was alive the Torah was literally in the heavens. That is, the domain of Torah remained with Hashem and his heavenly court. Moshe was “connected” to the source. He had learned all the mitzvos and the deep meanings that Hashem intended for us to know. If there was a question as to what the proper course of action Hashem wanted from us, we merely had to ask Moshe. If Moshe was unclear (like in the story of the person who gathered wood on Shabbos) or if he forgot a halacha (such as in the case of the daughters of Tzelaphchad) Moshe could go directly to Hashem to clarify.

On the last day of his life the Torah was gifted to the Jewish people. The Torah became our domain. Our sages were now the final authority as to what the proper halacha was in any given situation. Therefore, even if Hashem disagreed with the sages’ interpretation, we would still follow their interpretation (see the Talmudic dispute between R’ Eliezer and the other sages wherein Hashem seemingly sides with R’ Eliezer but we follow the ruling of the sages, Talmud Bavi Baba Metzia 59b).

On the last day of his life Moshe finished writing the entire Torah and gave it to the Jewish people (see 31:9). In order for him to properly give over the Torah, so that it could become the domain of Bnei Yisroel (and no longer in the heavens), Moshe could no longer have access to the secrets and wellsprings of the Torah. Thereby, on Moshe’s final day, the Torah became wholly ours, and our responsibility to properly define.

[Rav Frand - Parshas Netzavim - No Excuse Not To “Do Teshuvah”

Thu, Sep 7, 5:11 PM (8 hours ago)

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Netzavim - No Excuse Not To “Do Teshuvah”

This dvar Torah was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 385, Fasting On Rosh Hashana. Good Shabbos!

According to the standard order of the weekly parshios, Parshas Nitzavim is always read before Rosh HaShana. Despite the fact that our current order of reading the parshiyos is not necessarily the way that it was always practiced, there could be no more appropriate parsha to read at precisely this time of year. Nitzavim contains the following series of pesukim (verses):

“For this mitzvah that I am prescribing to you today is not too wondrous for you, it is not too distant. It is not in Heaven that you should say ‘Who shall go up to Heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it?’ It is not over the sea so that you should say ‘Who will cross the

sea and get it for us, so that we will be able to hear it and keep it?’ It is something that is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can keep it.” (Devarim 30:11-14)

There is a difference of opinion among the early commentators as to which mitzvah the Torah is referring. According to the Ramban (1194-1270) and others who follow his opinion, the Torah is referring to the mitzvah of Teshuvah (Repentance, Return to G-d). Teshuvah is this mitzva that is “within our capacity and within our reach to fulfill.”

The Sforno (1470-1550) writes as follows concerning this pasuk: “It is not too wondrous for you” – that you would require neviim (prophets). “It is not too distant” – that you would require distant wise men of the generation to explain to you that which is necessary to accomplish it, even while you are still in exile.”

A person should not think, “In these times, I am incapable of doing Teshuvah. Had I lived in the times of the neviim who could have directly told me exactly what I was doing wrong – then I could have repented properly. Unfortunately, I live in a period of history when there are no neviim.” To counteract such thoughts, the Torah assures us “It is not in Heaven” – implying that we do not need prophetic words from heaven to allow us to do Teshuva. This is no excuse.

Likewise, we cannot argue “If I had a real maggid mussar (expounder of homiletic lessons of chastisement) then I might be inspired to repent. If the Chofetz Chaim or the Vilna Gaon were here and would tell me to do Teshuvah, I would do it!” To counteract such thoughts, the Torah informs us “It is not across the Sea.” This, too, is no excuse.

“For the matter is very near. It is within your mouth and your heart to do it.” We do not need neviim or wise men. It is all up to us. This pasuk is a double-edged sword. Teshuvah is easy. It is accessible. But, on the other hand, it is completely up to us. We cannot fall back on external excuses.

Perhaps this is hinted at in the famous Gemara (Avodah Zarah 17a) regarding Eleazar ben Durdaya. When the woman of ill repute told Eleazar ben Durdaya that he would never be able to repent, he pleaded “Heaven and Earth request mercy for me.” They responded that they could not help him. He invoked the aid of the stars and of the sea and was given the same answer. The Gemara says that he put his head between his knees and he expired on the spot as a result of intense remorse and repentance. What is the symbolism of placing his head between his knees? This was the ultimate acknowledgment that his repentance was dependent upon himself alone.

We cannot wait for others to do Teshuvah for us and we cannot blame others for our failure to do Teshuvah. It is not because our parents raised us poorly. It is not because our

environment was bad. There are no excuses! The ability to do Teshuvah is within our own mouths and hearts. (410) 602-1350]

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington.
Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Yerushalayim.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Nitzavim / Vayeilech is provided below:

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