

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet Vayelech 5773

In My Opinion :: THE NEW YEAR :: Rabbi Berel Wein

The year 5773 is now upon us. As with every new year, every new beginning, every new infant born and project initiated, we pin great hopes and expectations upon the new arrival. We hope and pray for a new year of tranquility and peace, success and health and for our emotional and spiritual growth. Most of us have had many such hopes in the past and truth be said not all of the new years met our hopes and expectations.

But that should not prevent us from hoping that this new year of 5773 will meet our high expectations. One of the secret benefits of our commemoration of the arrival of a new year on Rosh Hashanah is the gift of turning a new page in our life's book. We preface the arrival of the new year by stating: "May the misfortunes of the past year be ended and may the blessings of the new year now commence."

The ability to get past previous troubles and failures and move on in life is one of the essential ingredients of a Jewish life that is directed towards holiness and eternity. King Solomon in Proverbs teaches us: "The righteous person may fall seven times but he rises!" Both the righteous and those who are less than righteous fall. Such is the human condition – fragile, inconsistent and imperfect.

However, the righteous person always rises and makes a new beginning. He or she refuses to wallow in the despondency of his or her fallen condition whereas those that are less than righteous eventually do not attempt to raise themselves from their own pit of despair and sin. This stark message of the definition of righteousness in contrast to evil is one of the main lessons of Rosh Hashanah and the advent of a new year.

Another important lesson that the beginning of a new year teaches us is the value of time itself. The coming of a new year focuses our minds sharply on how swiftly time passes. Why it was almost only yesterday when the new year of 5772 arrived! What happened to its days and how did it pass so swiftly?

Our teacher Moshe in his prayer as recorded in Psalms ruefully commented that life itself flies away swiftly. And so it does. Time is the irreplaceable element in human existence. It has a unique value that is all its own. Time is the greatest tool available to humans for achievement and self-actualization. It is too precious to be willfully squandered.

We are not bidden to solve all problems, settle all issues, accomplish all lofty goals in our lifetime. We do not have sufficient years to accomplish all that. However the rabbis taught us that we are not freed from our obligations to attempt to do so. Realizing the limitations that time imposes on us and exploiting the time given to us for spiritual and emotional self-improvement, for building a Torah life and society and for aiding, helping and sustaining our fellow Jews the world over are the messages that the advent of the new year brings. The new year is a timely reminder of the value of time itself.

The arrival of the new year also teaches us how uncertain everything in life is. Our modern world has produced a vast array of experts on every facet of existence on this planet Earth. Yet no matter how much we seem to know and how clearly the future is outlined for us by our experts, we are constantly blindsided by events not only unforeseen but in many cases unimagined.

We are always brought to heel in our know-it-all arrogance and humbled by the yet unknown and unforeseen. The new year forces us to deal with our souls and our Creator. It acknowledges the omnipresent hand of God, so to speak, which guides our private and public existence. Again, it points out at one and the same instance, our helplessness and yet also our responsibilities. Without God mankind is doomed to a vacuous nothingness. But without human efforts and accomplishments, God's work of creation will remain stillborn, empty and void.

The new year emphasizes this Divine partnership between the Creator and His creatures, between the holy and eternal and the necessarily mundane and ordinary. As the new year begins we, so to speak, issue our annual

report on this partnership to our eternal partner. May the new year be one of blessings to all of Israel, personally and collectively.
Gmar chatima tova

Weekly Parsha :: VAYELECH/SHUVA :: Rabbi Berel Wein

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabat shalom

Gmar chatima tova

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Vayelech

For the week ending 22 September 2012 / 5 Tishri 5773

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Insights

The Last Day

“Moses went and spoke these words to all of Yisrael.” (31:1)

A thought for Shabbat Shuva (the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur).

What would you do if you knew that you had just one more day to live?

How would you spend that last day?

Would you drive to the ocean with the top down for a last glimpse of the sun rising over the waves? Would you book lunch at the best restaurant in town? Or maybe you would indulge in the thrill of a dangerous sport like skydiving or bungee jumping, safe in the knowledge that there is no such thing as a dangerous sport on the last day of your life.

Or maybe, if you were a more contemplative sort, you'd spend those last few hours writing down your thoughts and feelings as you were about to depart this world.

How many of us would spend those precious last moments calling on our friends to say goodbye, to give them comfort and consolation?

That's what Moshe did when G-d told him that he had awoken to his last day on Earth. Moshe, the humblest person to walk this planet understood that his duty on his last day was to take leave of the Jewish people and comfort them over his impending death.

And how did Moshe comfort the people? What were his words of comfort? He said, "I am an old man of a hundred and twenty years. I am no longer permitted to teach you Torah; G-d has closed the wellsprings of Torah from me. G-d will not let me cross the Jordan River, but do not be discouraged! The Divine Presence will precede you, and Yehoshua will be your leader."

What did Moshe mean when he said "G-d has closed the wellsprings of Torah from me"? Moshe was telling the people that he had lost the power to communicate Torah to them. Moshe was Moshe Rabbeinu, Moshe "our teacher." An essential quality of a teacher is that he can adapt his knowledge to the level and understanding of his pupils. When Moshe passed from this world, however, his understanding of Torah was so elevated that he could no longer present the Torah on the level of the Jewish People. Hence the metaphor of the wellspring. A wellspring flows outward. Moshe's ability to flow his wisdom to the people was closed up.

In fact, Moshe never found it easy to teach the People. When G-d told Moshe to return to Egypt and take out the Jewish People from their slavery, Moshe replied, "I am not a man of words... for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech" (Shemot 4:10). In other words, Moshe's connection to spirituality was so elevated that it was extremely difficult for him to clothe his perception within the sinews of speech.

Moshe comforted the people with the knowledge that though he would not be there to teach them Torah, the Torah would still be with them. They would still have "The Guide To Life" and teachers who could bring its supernal wisdom into each and every life throughout the generations.

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Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Parshas Vayeilech

Hashem spoke to Moshe, "Behold, your days are drawing near to die; summon Yehoshua, and both of you shall stand in the Ohel Moed, and I shall instruct him. (31:14)

The changing of the guard, the transference of leadership, was about to occur. Hashem instructed Moshe Rabbeinu to summon Yehoshua. The time had arrived. In the Midrash, V'zos HaBrachah, Chazal teach that ten "deaths" were written concerning Moshe; ten times the Torah writes the concept of death as relating to Moshe - but the decree had still not been sealed... until... Moshe did not take the entire idea to heart. He conjectured, "Klal Yisrael sinned many a time, sins that were certainly much more egregious than anything I have ever done. Yet, when I entreated Hashem on their behalf - He listened and forgave them. I have never sinned, even as a young child. Is it not for certain that when I pray for myself that Hashem will listen to my entreaty?"

When Hashem saw how trivial Moshe had made his punishment, that he was taking his time engaging in prayer, Hashem retracted all of His favors. Moshe was not going to enter into Eretz Yisrael. Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl, derives from here that if Moshe would have immediately taken the decree to heart and commenced praying, he would have averted disaster. Those moments of delay spelled the ultimate difference for Moshe. He did no

wrong. He even prayed five hundred and fifteen times. Sadly, however, it was too late.

Moshe was acutely aware of the efficacy of tefillah. He just felt that he had time. Of course, he was going to daven - but not right away. Hashem would listen. He always did. Moshe was right. Hashem did listen. Regrettably, this time the answer was no. Moshe had waited too long. Tefillah requires immediacy.

Tefillah must be expressed with a sense of urgency, thereby indicating that the supplicant understands that there is no other way to achieve anything in this world. Praying at leisure, as if one is carrying out a service, fulfilling an obligation, is not prayer. We derive from Chazal that, although Moshe Rabbeinu was acutely aware of the significance of prayer, the mere fact that he did not express a sense of imperativeness, feeling compelled to immediately pray, was an indication - relative to the quintessential leader's exalted spiritual level - of a subtle laxity in his attitude toward prayer. As a result, his five hundred and fifteen prayers supplicating Hashem to allow him entry into Eretz Yisrael did not achieve the desired result.

It is a frightening thought, especially at this time of the year - Shabbos Shuvah. It is with great trepidation that I include the following two narratives, whose primary purpose is to inspire and motivate us to pray with greater urgency and deeper concentration at this compelling moment. As we approach Yom Kippur, may it be the will of Hashem that our tefillos be answered l'tovah, and that we and our families enjoy good health and Torah nachas.

In the introduction to his second volume on prayer, *Touched by a Prayer*, Rabbi Yechiel Spero relates that Horav Aharon Karliner, zl, was once asked how he prepared for tefillah. What did he think about as he put his mind in focus, his heart in concentration, as he prepared to ascend the spiritual realms to supplicate the Almighty? The Rebbe's answer should serve as a wake-up call for us all.

"I imagine that I am lying in bed," the Rebbe began, "and my strength is beginning to ebb away. I become weaker and weaker; my pulse slows down and then, I die. The Chevra Kaddisha, Jewish Burial Society, comes and prepares my mortal remains for burial. My tachrichim, linen shrouds, are placed on me. The members of the Chevra Kadisha ask mechilah, beg forgiveness, for any inappropriety they might have done in preparing my body, and they place me in the casket in which they will carry me to the cemetery. After a short walk, we arrive at the cemetery. I am about to be lowered into the ground which will serve as my final resting place.

"Suddenly, a Heavenly Voice is heard: 'Stop the funeral! The Almighty has decreed that this Jew is to be given one more chance to open his mouth in prayer.'

"I am allowed one prayer. That is all. Then the funeral will continue."

The Karliner looked at his questioner and said, "This is how I prepare myself for prayer."

A second episode demonstrates the motif of prayer and the significance of urgency in expressing one's emotions. It occurred with Horav Yeshayah Bardaky, zl, son-in-law of Horav Yisrael, zl, m'Shklov, a distinguished student of the Gaon m'Vilna. Rav Yeshayah was among the group of the Gaon's followers who emigrated to Eretz Yisrael. He eventually became the Rav of the Perushim community in Yerushalayim which was comprised of the Gaon's followers.

Travel on the high seas in the rickety boats which was the mode of overseas travel two hundred years ago was dangerous, but, then, so is crossing the street today. One does what he must do, and leaving Europe for Eretz Yisrael was a primary goal for the Gaon's talmidim, students. With great yearning, these families left the "comfort" of their Eastern European environment to brave the dangerous seas and hostile environment, just to live in the Holy Land.

Rav Yeshayah was among the last group to set sail from Europe. He traveled with his young son and daughter. Their ship, which was not much to begin with, was wrecked by a storm and sank. Lucky to survive the wreck, Rav Yeshayah instructed his children to climb on his back, as he made a desperate attempt to swim to shore. After a few hours of rigorous swimming, Rav Yeshayah could no longer continue. The weight of both

children was too much. They would all drown-- unless one child "volunteered" to let go.

This is neither the place nor the forum for a discussion on the halachic decision that renders priority to the male child. In any event, Rav Yeshayah explained to his young daughter that, sadly, she was the logical choice. Anyone reading this story will certainly feel the emotion that an exhausted father, after hours of swimming in the treacherous waters, must have sustained during the moments of his final goodbye with his young, precious daughter. It is a decision no human being should ever have to make. Father and daughter held each other very tightly, as the implication of Rav Yeshayah's words sunk into his daughter's mind.

Suddenly, the young girl cried out, "But, Abba, I have no other father!" She implied that she had no one to whom to turn. He owed it to her. Upon hearing these words, Rav Yeshayah gathered his strength together and told his daughter to hold on. With superhuman effort, fueled by fatherly love, he reached the shore, where he collapsed, entirely spent and exhausted. As he touched the ground, he passed out.

After a short while, Rav Yeshayah woke up. He turned to his daughter and asked her to forever remember the profound words she had said when she was on the brink of drowning. "Remember that, whenever you are in trouble," he told her, "just turn to Hashem and say to Him exactly what you said to me, that you have no other father except for me, and you will discover that actually you do have another Father, Who can and will come to your rescue."

So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Bnei Yisrael, place it in their mouths. (31:19)

Chazal (Eiruvin 54b) derive from the words simah b'fihem, "Place it into their mouth," that Torah must be taught in such a manner that the student fully comprehends the material, to the point that he becomes fluent in it. Indeed, Ramban opines that a rebbe, Torah teacher, must review the material as often as necessary until his students are proficient. If the going is slow, he may not become angry; rather he must keep on explaining. In a letter to educators, Horav Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz, zl, underscored the need for a rebbe to present an amicable countenance, so that the student will be better inclined to accept his lesson. Patience and forbearance mark the qualities of a successful rebbe. In addition, the rebbe should pour out his heart to Hashem daily during his recitation of the Ahavah Rabbah prayer, for success in Torah study and its dissemination.

It is noteworthy that, when we conclude the Bircas HaTorah with the blessing of La'asok b'divrei Torah, "To engross ourselves in the words of the Torah," we add another entreaty: V'haarev na. "Please G-d, sweeten the words of Your Torah in our mouth... May we and our offspring and the offspring of Your People... know Your Name." Why is this appendix recited only concerning the mitzvah of limud haTorah? Why do we not ask Hashem: "May all Your mitzvos be sweet in our mouth?"

Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl, explains that the primary goal of the educator is to imbue his student with a desire, passion, for Torah. By infusing the child with the feeling that the Torah is sweet, he imparts to him that concealed within the pages of the Torah is a hidden light that illuminates his life and gives it meaning and "sweetness."

The rebbe, however, cannot successfully confer this emotion unless he has it himself. The rebbe who himself does not sense the sweetness of Torah cannot endow his students with the feeling. The rebbe who does not love every page of Chumash, Navi, Gemorah, Halachah, b'lev v'nefesh, with heart and soul, is unable to transmit to the student the inherent love one must have for the Torah. The students must sense the rebbe's excitement as he enters the classroom. "I am about to teach you Torah - the greatest and most significant body of knowledge that the world has ever seen! You are so lucky to learn. I am so fortunate to teach!" With this kind of attitude, we can hope that the mesikus, sweetness, of the Torah will be felt by the students.

When someone has a bitter taste in his mouth, whatever he imbibes will also have a bitter aftertaste - regardless of its original sweetness. When Klal Yisrael came to Marah, they could not drink the well water. The Torah says ki marim heim, "Because they were bitter" (Shemos 15:23). In the plain sense, the bitterness is a reference to the waters which were bitter.

The Baal Shem Tov HaKadosh interprets the pasuk homiletically, with the bitterness focusing on the people. The people were embittered; thus, everything they tasted had a bitter taste. Their outlook was jaundiced. Therefore, the water tasted bitter.

A student who has difficulty learning feels miserable. The difficulty may be the result of a simple learning disability which, when properly addressed, is easily corrected; or it can be the result of deep-rooted issues which are emotional in nature, the result of some form of trauma. Regardless of the cause, the consequence is the same: the child is miserable; thus, he is unable to "taste" the sweetness of Torah. Ultimately, this has an effect on his entire spiritual persona. It explains why some young Jews from observant families just seem to lack the geshmack, satisfaction and pleasure, of Torah study and all of its fringe benefits.

So, what does one do? The answer is elementary. Perhaps, the following vignettes will be illuminating: One of the close chassidim of the Bais Yisrael, zl, of Gur, related that as a youth he had studied in Yeshivas Sefas Emes in Eretz Yisrael, the principal Yeshiva of the Gerrer Chassidic movement. At the beginning of the z'man, semester, the Rebbe asked him if he had already arranged for chavrusos, study partners. He replied with satisfaction, mentioning the names of some of the preeminent students in the yeshiva.

When the Rebbe heard the names, he said, "You have selected for yourself the 'lions of the group,' the top students in the yeshiva. So, what will be with the weaker students? Who will study with them? Who will help them learn?"

Understandably, the Rebbe was communicating a powerful message to his close student: one might think that he loses out by studying with the weaker student. This is an error. It might seem that way at first glance, but it will work itself out. Hashem will repay him. Torah is Divinely authored, and the ability to grasp its profundities goes beyond the natural approach to success. Spend time with weaker students, and Hashem will spend time with you.

Horav Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz, zl, had a group of students who had great difficulty in understanding the Talmudic lessons in the yeshiva. He brought them before the Chazon Ish, who was not only the gadol hador, preeminent Torah leader of the generation, but he also had a warm, sensitive heart that matched his encyclopedic knowledge of Torah. "How do I imbue these boys with a love and taste for Torah?" Rav Michel Yehudah asked the venerable sage. The Chazon Ish replied, "Each and every Jewish soul has its own unique, individual chelek, portion, in Torah. When he learns that specific portion which is inherently his, he will sense the pleasant taste of Torah. Once he achieves this, the student will be inclined to study further and delve deeper into other areas of Torah."

Then this song shall speak up before it as a witness, for it shall not be forgotten from the month of its offspring. (31:21)

The Torah guarantees us that it not be forgotten. This refers to the Torah in its entirety. It will be with us until the end of time. This assurance has been put to the test during each generation, reaching epic proportions during some of our darkest periods of history. In his Chayei Olam, the Steipler Rav, zl, takes the reader on a journey throughout history, demonstrating for us the many challenges that we have confronted. We were hurt; we were exiled; we were persecuted; but our commitment to the Torah remained intact. The Torah has undergone nine exiles: Bavel; North Africa; Egypt; Italy; Spain; France/Germany; Poland/ Lithuania. These countries have served as home to Torah development, its literature and dissemination.

Horav Chaim Volozhiner, zl, premier disciple of the Gaon, zl, m'Vilna, founder and Rosh Yeshiva of the famed Yeshivas Volozhin, was once davening Shacharis together with the Yeshiva. Suddenly, he emitted a large sigh and began to cry bitterly for a few moments. Following davening, he customarily went to his office where he would spend a good part of the day. Obviously, the students were concerned about the cry. It was highly unusual for the Rosh Yeshiva to show such extreme emotion. The students prevailed upon Horav David Tebel, zl, author of the Nachalas David and probably Rav Chaim's greatest student, to enter the room and ask Rav Chaim for an explanation.

The Rosh Yeshivah explained that Torah has been compelled to journey through ten exiles. It is now in its ninth exile. There is one more - one more place where the Torah will be studied and developed, America: "I fear for the hardships the architects of Torah in America will experience as they confront the various challenges and obstacles in its development. I am afraid of what they will have to endure during this process. And I wonder if they will succeed in establishing a yeshivah that will follow in the tradition that has been transmitted down to us from generation to generation. Yes, I wonder what image Torah will have in America."

Be that as it may, the Torah's journey to America has succeeded, but is it on the hallowed level that it was in pre-World War II Europe? What we must understand is that the Torah we study today in America is the same Torah that has survived generations of exile. Thus, by studying it, we establish and concretize it as an inextricable bond with the generations that have preceded us. Hashem guaranteed that the Torah will never be forgotten. We are part of that Divine promise. Every time we immerse ourselves in the sea of Talmud, we maintain the guarantee. How fortunate is one who devotes himself to Torah study - be it on a permanent or even part-time devotion--for he is playing a crucial role in fulfilling Hashem's promise.

If we peruse history, we will note that it was the promise that the Torah will never be forgotten that has spurred and maintained the growth of our People. After the recent Holocaust, a few Torah scholars, themselves embers saved from the raging fires that consumed most of European Jewry, came to these shores. This handful of dedicated men succeeded in planting the seeds of the Torah renaissance we enjoy today. This is due to the power of Hashem's promise. The Steipler writes that this promise was given to us collectively as a nation. In other words, the Torah will not be forgotten from the nation. In order for each individual to benefit from and reap the fruits of this promise, he must attach himself to the nation. This means not "once in a while," or on "specific holidays," or "when I am in the mood," but all the time.

While it might sound that the above words are written for those who act like part-time Jews, who saunter in and out of shul as they please, they are written for all of us. We do not know how our "participation" in Judaism is viewed from Above. I recently read a story concerning Horav Aharon Karliner, zl, which I think is frightening and should give us all something to consider this Shabbos Shuvah.

The Karliner was standing in his customary place in front of the congregation. It was the first day of Rosh Hashanah, and the chazzan, cantor, began Tefillas Shacharis with his rendition of the one word which describes the awesome nature of the holy day: "Hamelech! The King!" This is, of course, a reference to Hashem whom we "coronate" on Rosh Hashanah. At the very moment that the chazzan intoned this word, Rav Aharon fainted!

A few moments went by, and the Rebbe came to and continued the prayer service. After davening, one of his close students asked him, "What happened to cause the Rebbe to pass out?" The disciple understood that nothing "just happens." There is a deep reason and meaning for everything that occurs.

The Karliner replied, "The word Hamelech reminded me of an incident related in the Talmud Gittin 56a. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai presented himself to Vespasian, the Roman governor, who was in the midst of laying siege to Yerushalayim. The sage greeted the governor with the words, "Peace to you, your majesty. Peace to you, your majesty." Vespasian was taken aback. After all, he was only the governor. He countered, "You deserve to be executed... for if I am king, why have you not come until now to pay homage to me?"

The Rebbe continued, "On the Days of Awe, when we proclaim Hashem as King of the Universe, He might respond to us, 'If so, if I am King, why have you not come before Me until now?'"

As an added explanation, the Karliner was intimating that even on their exalted level of devotion to Hashem, the Almighty might find fault in their awareness of Him during the rest of the year. We think that we are devoted; we think that we attend services in shul; we think that we learn properly. What if we are wrong? At this time of the year when

introspection is a constant-- or at least it should be-- we should give some thought to these questions. Are we doing enough, often enough, and with sincere devotion? To be included in the nation's renaissance, we must play an active role in being part of the nation.

Moshe wrote this song on that day, and he taught it to the Bnei Yisrael. (31:22)

It is noteworthy that the prophecy concerning the vicissitudes and challenges facing the Jewish People in the future is written as a song. The Bostoner Rebbe, zl, observes that, indeed, it is typical of the Torah and Hashem's great love for the Jewish People. Even when the Almighty wanted to warn and rebuke the nation through Moshe Rabbeinu, He did so with a song. For a song has the ability to move the heart, to rebuke with love, to involve the whole person and to teach him as well.

Rebuke is also an attitude. For example, one sees another person doing something that is offensive to him. He can either rebuke the offender or leave the room. Once he leaves, no one is present to take offense. Thus, the activity in which the offender is engaged is no longer offensive.

A classic example of the above scenario would be the following episode. Horav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, zl, the Bais HaLevi, once visited Horav Yankele Gezundheit, zl, Rav of Warsaw. The Brisker Rav and the Rav of Warsaw were having a delightful conversation in the living room when suddenly they heard the Jewish maid break out in song.

Since it is forbidden for Jewish men to listen to a Jewish woman, other than family, sing, Rav Gezundheit immediately jumped up from his seat and proceeded to the kitchen to tell the young woman to quiet down. Rav Yosha Ber also jumped up - but not to go to the kitchen. He grabbed Rav Yankele's arm and steered him outside of the house, straight into the street. Two different reactions. Two great men. Rav Gezundheit was startled, but before he could express himself, Rav Yosha Ber explained his actions, "Your maid works hard all day. Apparently, the work is getting to her, and her only form of pleasure is singing. While the halachah clearly prohibits us from listening to her sing, it is not sufficient reason for us to prevent her from singing, thereby taking away her joy. We should just simply walk outside and the issue will be resolved."

There is a time for rebuke, and there is a time to circumvent rebuke. Perhaps, the woman should have thought twice before beginning to sing loudly, but if this was her way of joyful expression, so be it. The rabbi should pick himself up and walk outside, allowing her to have some pleasure. Yet, there are those who often look, almost lay in waiting, for someone to make a mistake, thus allowing for them to issue words of rebuke. Giving mussar, reproach, is important and very helpful, but it should be something that one does only because he must. Otherwise, it is not mussar, but rather, self-aggrandizement.

I just had occasion to read a vignette that presents a similar connotation. An "older" bachur, thirty-year-old single yeshivah student, was davening shacharis in a shul. When the worshippers came to the tefillah, Va'yevarech David, they all, as customary, stood up to recite the prayer. The bachur recited the prayer without budging from his seat. One of the more "outspoken" worshippers was peeved by the young man's actions and not-so-subtly brought it to his attention. "What? Are you too good to stand up for David Ha'Melech's blessing?" the man snarled.

Not one to take this rebuke "sitting down," the young man replied, "I have been 'sitting' for thirty years (waiting for a spouse), but that does not seem to bother you. You are only concerned with my 'sitting' through the Va'yevarech David prayer."

There are those who seem to enjoy rebuking others, actually waiting for the opportunity to present itself. This is not the Torah way. Rebuke should be expressed as a song - with harmony throughout.

Va'ani Tefillah

V'sein b'libeinu binah, l'havin u'l'haskil, lishmoa, lilmod u'l'lameid.

Instill in our hearts a depth of perception, to perceive, and to understand, to hear, to learn and to teach.

L'havin, to perceive, is the highest level of understanding. Through his sense of understanding, one actually perceives a level of profundity which is unlike any experienced by a regular man. Only the Neviim reached this level of understanding. Why does binah, perception, precede wisdom?

Binah is explained by the commentators as maivin davar mitoch davar, understanding one thing from another. In order to perceive the second item, one must first understand its predecessor. If there is no shmiah, listening, and lilmud, learning, there is nothing to understand. Why is lishmoa not first? Horav David Cohen, Shlita, explains that we are being taught the proper approach to Torah. One should not simply take a cursory attitude towards Torah learning. There are those who are only interested in studying "concepts," but refuse to get down to real learning. Thus, we are being taught that one must strive to understand with depth, to plumb the profundities of Torah in such a manner that he is able to understand one thing from another. Then - he is ready to learn the Torah and absorb its wisdom.

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Rabbi Weinreb's Parsha Column, Parshat Vayelech

Sponsored in memory of Nathan and Louise Schwartz a"h

"Forgiven, but Not Forgotten"

He was one of the greatest Talmud scholars of the last century, but outside of a small circle of disciples, he was never well-known. He was a tragic figure in many ways, and although few have heard of him today, he has not been totally forgotten.

Interestingly, forgetting was one of the central themes of his many teachings.

His name was Rabbi Arye Tzvi Fromer, and he hailed from an obscure town in Poland named Koziglov. He served in the rabbinate of several towns with equally obscure names. His extreme modesty mitigated the spread of his reputation.

Late in his life, he experienced the unique frustration of being called upon to succeed an individual who was unusually charismatic and world-famous. He was asked to fill the shoes of a great man, and his accomplishments were constantly compared, usually unfavorably, to the achievements of his glorious predecessor.

The man he was called upon to succeed as the head of the great Talmudical Academy in pre-World War II Lublin, Poland, was Rabbi Meir Shapiro. Besides being the founder of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, an innovative school for prodigious young Torah scholars, Rabbi Shapiro was an author, an orator of note, and a composer of Chassidic melodies. He was a member of the Polish Parliament and is remembered best as the person who introduced the concept of Daf Yomi, the daily study of the same page of Talmud each day by Jews all over the world.

Rabbi Shapiro died of a sudden illness while a relatively young man in his early 40s. The search for a successor was not an easy one, and the reaction of most people to the choice of Rabbi Fromer was one of astonishment. "Who is he," people asked, "and how could he possibly follow in the footsteps of the multitalented Rabbi Shapiro?"

Destiny did not give Rabbi Fromer much time to prove himself worthy of his new position. Within several years, World War II broke out. He suffered the deprivations of the ghetto and was brutally murdered by the Nazis.

We do have some of the writings he published in his lifetime, and those few of his disciples to survive the Holocaust published some of his teachings on the weekly Torah portion. I have become enamored with these writings and am particularly taken by the fact that he returns again and again to the theme of forgetting.

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayelech (Deuteronomy 31:1-30), we come across the following phrase: "This song (the Torah) will proclaim himself as a witness, for it will never be forgotten from the mouths of his descendants..." Here, the Almighty assures us that despite the vicissitudes of Jewish history, the Torah will never be forgotten.

Rabbi Fromer relates this assurance to an interesting phenomenon. The reader of this column may not be aware that many passages of the Talmud were censored by the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries and are

today absent from most editions of this fundamental text. Jews have struggled in various ways to preserve these censored passages, and some modern editions do incorporate them, but by and large they have been forgotten.

Rabbi Fromer was once asked by a student who had just completed studying a tractate of the Talmud whether he could make a siyum, a festive meal celebrating that completion. "After all," the student argued, "I didn't really complete the entire tractate. I did not study the censored passages because I had no access to them."

Rabbi Fromer responded, consoled the student, and encouraged him to go through with the festive celebration. "You must understand," he argued, "that we have a guarantee in the Bible that Torah will not be forgotten. If some words were indeed forgotten, that is ipso facto proof that they were not authentic Torah to begin with."

Many will take issue with this concept and find it too radical. But the message is one which we can all affirm. That which is not Torah can be forgotten. What is trivial is ephemeral. Torah is not forgotten. Sanctity is eternal.

This lesson carries over to the wondrous day which typically follows the reading of the Torah portion of Vayelech. I refer, of course, to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Even Jews who have forgotten the rest of their Jewish heritage remember Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur does not allow us to forget who we are.

Stories abound about individuals who were on the threshold of apostasy, but who returned to our faith because of their experience of Yom Kippur. That fascinating Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, is just one example of this phenomenon and writes in his memoirs of his readiness to accompany his close cousin to the baptismal font, only to reconsider after spending a Yom Kippur in a small synagogue somewhere in Germany, nearly one hundred years ago.

"Israel, and the Torah, and the Holy One Blessed Be He, are one." This statement of the mystical holy Zohar says it all. All three are bound together forever.

"Forgive and forget." That is a cliché with which we are all familiar. One of the messages of hope which pervades this season of the Jewish year is that the Holy One Blessed Be He forgives but does not forget.

He does not allow his two most cherished objects, His Torah and His people, to be forgotten.

Zvi Arye Fromer could easily have been forgotten, given the horrible circumstances in which he perished. But the Almighty did not allow him to be forgotten. Nor did He allow the Torah he taught to be forgotten.

The Yizkor service, one of the prominent features of the liturgy of Yom Kippur, is a method by which we do our part to see to it that those souls whom we knew personally are not forgotten.

And our regular Torah study is the method by which we each see to it that the words of the Torah are not forgotten.

For four years now, these weekly columns on the parsha have helped so many of you, in an admittedly small way, to prevent the forgetting of Torah. I take this opportunity, at the beginning of this New Year, 5773, to thank each of you for reading my words, for taking them seriously, and for responding every week in so many wonderful ways to what I have to say.

May the Almighty bless you with a new year filled with peace and health, sweetness and joy, and much success. Ketiva Vachatima Tova to you and yours.

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Britain's Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The Heart, the Home, the Text

By now Moses had given 612 commands to the Israelites. But there was one further instruction he still had to give, the last of his life, the final mitzvah in the Torah:

Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel. (Deut. 31: 19)

The oral tradition understood this to be a command that each Israelite should take part in the writing of a Sefer Torah. Here is how Maimonides states the law:

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

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

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

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

For a hundred generations it was more than a book. It was God’s love letter to the Jewish people, the gift of His word, the pledge of their betrothal, the marriage contract between heaven and the Jewish people, the bond that God would never break or rescind. It was the story of the people and their written constitution as a nation under God. When they were exiled from their land it became the documentary evidence of past promise and future hope. In a brilliant phrase the poet Heinrich Heine called the Torah “the portable homeland of the Jew.” In George Steiner’s gloss, “The text is home; each commentary a return.”[1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To read more writings and teachings from the Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, please visit www.chief Rabbi.org.

Rav Kook List

Rav Kook on the Torah Portion

VaYeilech: The Song of Torah

Near the end of his life, Moses commanded the people:

“Now write for yourselves this song and teach it to the Israelites” (Deut. 31:19).

This verse is the source-text for the obligation of each Jew to write a Torah scroll (Sanhedrin 21b). [However, the Shulchan Aruch quotes the opinion of Rabbeinu Asher (the Rosh) that “Nowadays it is a mitzvah to write books of the Pentateuch, Mishnah, Talmud, and their commentaries,” since we no longer study directly from Torah scrolls.]

But why did Moses refer to the Torah as a ‘song’? In what way should we relate to the Torah as song?

Studying Mussar

A young scholar once wrote Rav Kook a letter probing certain philosophical issues, raising difficult questions that troubled him. Rav Kook was delighted to see the young scholar immerse his talents analyzing the philosophical aspects of Torah, unlike most Torah scholars who dedicate themselves solely to the study of Talmud and practical Halachah. Exploring abstract philosophical issues, Rav Kook stressed, is especially important in our times.

Nonetheless, Rav Kook urged the scholar to approach this field only after a prerequisite study of mussar texts.

“You should first acquire expertise in all moralistic tracts that you come across, starting with the easier texts. Great scholars, wise-hearted and exceptionally pious, wrote this literature from the heart. Many subjects of inquiry cannot be fully grasped until one’s emotions have been properly prepared.”

In other words, it is important to precede the analysis of Torah philosophy with the study of simpler texts that clarify the unique holiness of Torah. What is the function of this preparatory study? By studying mussar, we gain a proper appreciation and reverence for the subject at hand. Only after this emotional preparation are we ready to delve into an intellectual analysis of Torah thought.

Engaging the Emotions

It is for this reason, Rav Kook explained, the Torah is called a ‘song.’ Just as the beauty of song stirs the heart, so too, the special power of mussar literature lies in its ability to awaken our inner sensitivity to the divine nature of Torah. This emotive preparation is essential, as only the pure of heart are successful in penetrating the philosophical foundations of the Torah.

While ethical works do not engage the intellect to a high degree, they nonetheless enable the soul to recognize the Torah’s inner foundations. Of course, one should not be content with reading moralistic literature, but should continue with in-depth, analytical study of the Torah and its worldview.

(Gold from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Igrot HaRe’iyah vol. I, p. 94)
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