

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

Vayelech / Shuva

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 want, 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. Just look around at the Jewish world and its history. 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 Haftarah 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

Rabbi Berel Wein

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

VAYELECH - Torah as Song

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ZT"L

Moses' long and tempestuous career is about to end. With words of blessing and encouragement he hands on the mantle of leadership to his successor Joshua, saying "I am a hundred and twenty years old now, and I may no longer be able to enter and to leave, since the Lord has told me, 'You shall not cross this Jordan.'" (Deut. 31:2)

As Rashi notes, it is written, "shall not", although Moses is still physically capable. He is still in full bodily vigour, "his eyes had not grown dim, nor his vitality fled." (Deut. 34:7) But he has reached the end of his personal road. The time had come for another age, a new generation, and a different kind of leader. But before he takes his leave of life, God has one last command for him, and through him, for the future.

"So now write down this Song and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it in their mouths, that this Song may be My witness against them." Deut. 31:19

The plain sense of the verse is that God was commanding Moses and Joshua to write out the song that follows, that of Ha'azinu (Deut. 32:1-43). So Rashi and Nahmanides understand it. But the Oral Tradition read it differently. According to the Sages, "So now write down this Song" applies to the Torah as a whole. Thus the last of all the 613 commands is to write – or at least take part in writing, if only a single

letter – a Torah scroll. Here is Maimonides' statement of the law:

Every 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.[1]

Why this command? Why then, at the end of Moses' life? Why make it the last of all the commands? And if the reference is to the Torah as a whole, why call it a "song"?

The Oral Tradition is here hinting at a set of very deep ideas. First, it is telling the Israelites, and us in every generation, that it is not enough to say, "We received the Torah from Moses," or "from our parents." We have to take the Torah and make it new in every generation. We have to write our own scroll. The point about the Torah is not that it is old but that it is new; it is not just about the past but about the future. It is not simply some ancient document that comes from an earlier era in the evolution of society. It speaks to us, here, now – but not without our making the effort to write it again.

There are two Hebrew words for an inheritance: *nachalah* and *yerushah/ morashah*. They convey different ideas. *Nachalah* is related to the word *nachal*, meaning a river, a stream. As water flows downhill, so an inheritance flows down the generations. It happens naturally. It needs no effort on our part.

A *yerushah / morashah* is different. Here the verb is active. It means to take possession of something by a positive deed or effort. The Israelites received the land as a result of God's promise to Abraham. It was their legacy, their *nachalah*, but they nonetheless had to fight battles and win wars. *Lehavdil*, Mozart and Beethoven were both born to musical fathers. Music was in their genes, but their art was the result of almost endless hard work. Torah is a *morashah*, not a *nachalah*. We need to write it for ourselves, not merely inherit it from our ancestors.

And why call the Torah a Song? Because if we are to hand on our faith and way of life to the next generation, it must sing. Torah must be affective, not

just cognitive. It must speak to our emotions. As Antonio Damasio showed empirically in *Descartes' Error*[2], though the reasoning part of the brain is central to what makes us human, it is the limbic system, the seat of the emotions, that leads us to choose this way, not that. If our Torah lacks passion, we will not succeed in passing it on to the future. Music is the affective dimension of communication, the medium through which we express, evoke, and share emotion. Precisely because we are creatures of emotion, music is an essential part of the vocabulary of humankind.

Music has a close association with spirituality. As Rainer Maria Rilke put it:

*Words still go softly out towards the unsayable.
And music always new, from palpitating stones
Builds in useless space its godly home.[3]*

Song is central to the Judaic experience. We do not pray; we daven, meaning we sing the words we direct toward Heaven. Nor do we read the Torah. Instead we chant it, each word with its own cantillation. Even rabbinical texts are never merely studied; we chant them with the particular sing-song known to all students of Talmud. Each time and text has its specific melodies. The same prayer may be sung to half-a-dozen different tunes depending on whether it is part of the morning, afternoon, or evening service, and whether the day is a weekday, a Sabbath, a festival, or one of the High Holy Days. There are different cantillations for biblical readings, depending on whether the text comes from Torah, the prophets, or the Ketuvim, 'the writings'. Music is the map of the Jewish spirit, and each spiritual experience has its own distinctive melodic landscape.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it modulates into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. Music speaks to something deeper than the mind. If we are to make Torah new in every generation, we have to find ways of singing its song a new way. The words never change, but the music does.

A previous Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, once told me a story about two great rabbinic Sages of the nineteenth century, equally distinguished scholars, one of whom lost his children to the secular spirit of the age, the other of whom was blessed by children who followed in his path. The difference between them was this, he said: when it came to

seudah shlishit, the third Sabbath meal, the former spoke words of Torah while the latter sang songs. His message was clear. Without an affective dimension – without music – Judaism is a body without a soul. It is the songs we teach our children that convey our love of God.

Some years ago, one of the leaders of world Jewry wanted to find out what had happened to the “missing Jewish children” of Poland, those who, during the war, had been adopted by Christians families and brought up as Catholics. He decided that the easiest way was through food. He organised a large banquet and placed advertisements in the Polish press, inviting whoever believed they had been born a Jew to come to this free dinner. Hundreds came, but the evening was on the brink of disaster since none of those present could remember anything of their earliest childhood – until the man asked the person sitting next to him if he could remember the song his Jewish mother had sung to him before going to sleep. He began to sing *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen* (‘Raisins and Almonds’) the old Yiddish lullaby. Slowly others joined in, until the whole room was a chorus. Sometimes all that is left of Jewish identity is a song.

Rabbi Yechiel Michael Epstein (1829-1908) in the introduction to the *Aruch HaShulchan*, *Choshen Mishpat*, writes that the Torah is compared to a song because, to those who appreciate music, the most beautiful choral sound is a complex harmony with many different voices singing different notes. So, he says, it is with the Torah and its myriad commentaries, its “seventy faces”. Judaism is a choral symphony scored for many voices, the Written Text its melody, the Oral Tradition its polyphony.

So it is with a poetic sense of closure that Moses’ life ends with the command to begin again in every generation, writing our own scroll, adding our own commentaries, the people of the book endlessly reinterpreting the book of the people, and singing its song. The Torah is God’s libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir. Collectively we have sung God’s Song. We are the performers of His choral symphony. And though when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, because words are the language of the mind but music is the language of the soul.

[1] *Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah*, 7:1

[2] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, London, Penguin, 2005.

[3] “Sonnets to Orpheus,” book II, sonnet 10.

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Vayelech (Deuteronomy 31:1- 31:30) / Yom Kippur

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “And Moses called unto Joshua, and said unto him in the sight of all Israel: ‘Be strong and of good courage; for thou shalt go with this people into the land which the Lord hath sworn unto their fathers to give them; and thou shalt cause them to inherit it’” (Deuteronomy 31:7).

On Rosh Hashana, the anniversary of the day on which the world was conceived, I explained the sighing-sobbing sounds of the shofar as the natural response of the Jew to an incomplete, imperfect world of evil as well as good, chaos as well as order. We are entrusted with the mission of bringing down the Divine attributes of loving-kindness and courage, of compassionate righteousness and moral justice, to suffuse society with freedom and peace in order to perfect and complete the world in the Kingship of the Divine.

This is the message of the firm, exultant and victorious tekiya sound of the shofar, when we crown God as King of the Universe.

This task is not a simple one; it requires our becoming a holy nation and a kingdom whose every citizen is a successful teacher of morality to the world. Hence, Rosh Hashana begins a period of teshuva, or repentance, which must continue until it succeeds – however long that may take. It will require the cumulative commitment of many generations to the retelling and then reliving of the biblical narrative and to scrupulous observance of God’s will.

Rosh Hashana is a joyous festival because we have God’s biblical promise that we will eventually succeed.

We recite those verses of our success again and again in our Yom Kippur liturgy.

But there is a second significance to the broken, crying sound of the shofar. It is the existential sound of the individual who is living life within a vale of tears, who often doubts that this world will ever be perfected in the Kingship of the Divine, who always doubts that he will have the strength of will and character to make the world any better and who even doubts that the world had a Creator in the first place.

Although such a train of thought may initially release the questioner from certain ethical and ritual

responsibilities, it can only lead to a dead end. If life is merely a “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” why go through the struggle? The specter of a Sartrean world to which there is no exit other than suicide hardly leaves one with a life worth living or worth reproducing. It only leaves one trembling in fear before a dark, black hole of nothingness.

These questions plagued the children of Israel in the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf. Having experienced the concern, the miracles and wonders of the Lord during the Exodus, as well as the riveting Revelation at Sinai at which they actually heard the Word of the Divine, how could they possibly have fallen prey to the orgiastic abandon of wild Dionysiac debauchery? Moses, the source of their connection to God, had seemingly disappeared; they felt bereft and abandoned and so they lost themselves in a momentary “escape from freedom” and responsibility. Moses is so frustrated that he smashes the sacred tablets. He beseeches God first to forgive Israel and then to teach the next generations how to deal with probable recurrences in the future. He says, “Make Your ways known to me” (Exodus 33:13)—now the Israelites must act to find favor in Your eyes, and “Show me Your glory in this world” (Exodus 33:18) – what truly characterizes You and Your relationship to us.

God then tells Moses to stand in the cleft of a rock in the mountain range of Sinai, to ready himself for the second Revelation, the continuation of the Ten Commandments. God will reveal to Moses His Name, His face, as it were, the aspect of God that may be grasped by the human mind.

And this is the Divine Revelation on the 10th day of Tishrei, Yom Kippur: Havaya Havaya, the Ineffable Name of God, of Havaya, which means literally “to bring into being, to create,” and which the Talmudic sages identify as the God of infinite and unconditional love. The name is repeated twice, and as our Sages interpret, “I am the God who loves you before you sin and I am the God who loves you after you sin”—unconditional love.

The first Havaya explains that since God’s essence is love, His first human emanation, the human being, also has most fundamentally the transcendent power to love another and thereby to perfect himself and the world. The second Havaya explains that although the human being will fail and will sin along the way, God

will always be ready to forgive us as long as we seek forgiveness.

And God goes one step further. Yes, in our imperfect and incomplete world, it is often difficult to find God, to sense His presence and recognize His concern. It is even more difficult to bring the Divine Majesty to this often corrupt and evil world. But once a year, God will seek us, God will “come down” to us in His cloud of glory, God will knock on our door with His gift of unconditional forgiveness. All we need do is open the door for Him and let Him in—into our hearts, where He can already be found and into our homes and our families.

This is the magical gift of Yom Kippur, the day of consummate love.

Shabbat Shalom!

Parashat Nitzavim

by Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Nitzavim – The Last Parsha of 5782

Dear Friends;

Today is the 25th of Elul, the anniversary of the onetime event when HaShem created ex nihilo – physical matter from nothing. The day when the Torah begins and HaShem proclaimed “Let there be light”. Six days later on the first of Tishrei year 2, HaShem brought forward the first man and woman.

From then on, all that exists was formed from the original matter that emerged on that first day – day one.

Was the creation of Man a good thing? In Pirkei Avot Hillel says it was not, but Shammai disagreed; the argument ending with both agreeing that from the point of view of mankind it was not such a great idea, but since it is a fait accompli, we must try to be sin free.

As we study the history of mankind and the potential horrors in the future, one tends to agree that HaShem knows what he is doing, but for us it’s a dilemma.

Over the last 20 years I have written variations on the theme of aliya. I have cajoled, threatened, put the fear of punishment into the hearts of good Jews. I have pleaded to people’s sense of history and belonging to HaShem’s Chosen Nation. Not always was the music in my words pleasant to the ear, for that I regret. However, my intentions were first and foremost to save Jewish lives from the degradation of galut, and to rebuild our holy land after 2000 years of anger for our sins of yesterday.

Despite it all, I love every Jew for the simple reason that HaShem loves every Jew. I wish for our small band of tzadikim, not more than 12-13 million men, women and children (much less than the 18 million before the holocaust), to be inscribed in the book of life for health, clarity of mind and good deeds. However, to end this year's sequence of my traditional warning to come home now would be negligence on my part.

Russia is soon to begin drafting another 300 thousand troops. I believe that the US will have to follow suit and reinstate the selective service act. Your sons and daughters will be taken to military service – yes, daughters too. And when that happens youngsters from the age of 14 until 28 will not be permitted to leave the US, as was the law 60 years ago when I was denied permission to leave for Israel, and I appealed before having to take stronger measures.

Life doesn't stand still; it is volatile and mercurial with the resha'im dictating the direction of world affairs.

As I have suggested many times in the past, if you cannot come on aliya then send your sons and daughters here. It is not an easy decision to take but it can mean the difference between life and death.

In closing for this year of 5782

On Rosh HaShana HaShem judges individuals and nations. Each individual has an intimate connection with the Creator, so, there are people who have what to be worried about, while others can feel assured of another great year.

Among nations there are those whose destiny is bleak and others who will squeak through one more year, however, Am Yisrael will ascend from strength to strength. How do I know?

The answer is in a little parable:

A passenger plane entered air turbulence and fear gripped the passengers. All aboard showed signs of desperation and fear except for one young girl who stayed calm. When she was asked how she was able to contain herself, she responded quietly, "My father is the pilot".

Now you can understand why we in Eretz Yisrael can look forward to another great year, getting ever closer to the ge'ula.

Shabbat Shalom & K'tiva vachatima tova

Nachman Kahana

Insights Parshas Vayelech Tishrei 5783

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim / Talmudic University Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Avraham ben Ephraim z"l, by Harry Zubli. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

What's Mine is Yours

For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, and you will stray from the path that I have instructed you (to remain on) and evil will befall you at the end of days if you do what is evil in the eyes of Hashem [...] (31:29).

At the end of this week's parsha, Moshe ominously predicts that Bnei Yisroel will stray from Hashem and His Torah, and he informs them of the consequences of this betrayal.

Rashi (ad loc) points out that in all the days that Yehoshua, Moshe's successor, led Bnei Yisroel they did not sin, as it says (Joshua 24:31), "Yisroel worshipped Hashem all the days of Yehoshua." Rashi goes on to explain that we see from here that a person's student is as dear to him as his very self. In other words, Moshe includes Yehoshua's reign over Bnei Yisroel as his very own, and his prediction of when they would begin to sin only begins after Yehoshua's leadership ends.

Yet we find in the Yalkut Shimoni on this week's parsha (section 941) a story that belies this principle. The Yalkut relates that Moshe pleaded with Hashem that Yehoshua replace him as leader and that he himself be allowed to live. Hashem responded that it would be acceptable only if Moshe would agree to become Yehoshua's student and that Moshe would treat Yehoshua with the same deference and service that Yehoshua had for Moshe. Moshe readily agreed.

Moshe rose early and went to Yehoshua's tent (startling Yehoshua, who was a little shocked that his Rebbe had come to him) to explain the new arrangement. They walked to the ohel moed with Moshe walking to the left of Yehoshua (the position of deference). Yehoshua went in to receive a communication from Hashem and the cloud of glory separated them. When Yehoshua exited, Moshe asked him, "What did Hashem tell you?" Yehoshua responded, "Whenever Hashem spoke with you I was never privy to your conversation." Meaning that Hashem was speaking to him and him alone and Moshe was not entitled to know the contents of the

conversation. Moshe cried out, “I would rather die a thousand deaths than suffer this pang of jealousy!”

Based on Rashi’s principle that a teacher considers his student as his very self, why did Moshe feel such a torrent of jealousy towards Yehoshua? To put this in perspective; Moshe’s jealousy was so intense that he preferred actual death than to suffer it. How are we to understand this?

We find a very interesting description of the pain of jealousy (Shir Hashirim 8:6), “jealousy is as difficult as the grave.” Meaning that jealousy is actually the experience of being dead. As explained in prior editions of INSIGHTS, jealousy isn’t the same as envy. Envy is wanting what someone else has, while jealousy is the feeling that I have been replaced — it’s what a person feels when there is an attack on one’s very existence. This is why Moshe prefers dying to suffering jealousy; a person who dies merely passes to another existence, but experiencing jealousy, which is the feeling of being supplanted, that is nearly intolerable.

When a person gives someone a gift, he doesn’t become jealous of the recipient because he knows that he is the source for what the recipient has. Similarly, we find in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 105a) that a person is never jealous of his son or his student. The reason is because a son or a student gets everything he has from his parent or his teacher. But in this Yalkut Shimoni Hashem asks Moshe to become the student of Yehoshua. That meant that Moshe was no longer the source for Yehoshua and that Yehoshua was replacing him; something that was too painful for Moshe to bear.

The Yom Kippur Gift

This shabbos, the one between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is known as Shabbos Shuva – the shabbos of repentance and “returning” to Hashem. This time of year is known as the aseres yemei teshuvah and it culminates with the most solemn day – Yom Kippur. This is the final opportunity for one to plead his case before the Almighty and earn the right to live another year. This “life or death” court case before Hashem rightfully puts one in a very somber state of mind.

On Yom Kippur, when we ask Hashem for forgiveness, we always seem to be apologizing, year in and year out, for the same sins. How can an honest person come back with the same litany of apologies and requests for forgiveness and hope to be forgiven?

What are we truly trying to accomplish on Yom Kippur?

Furthermore, we find a rather curious description of Yom Kippur in the Gemara. The Mishna (Ta’anis 26b) states: “Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel said, ‘Bnei Yisroel had no joyous days as the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur, for on those days the young women used to dress in borrowed white gowns (so as not to embarrass those of lesser means) and dance in the vineyards [...] (the Baraisa adds that they were joined there by eligible young men).’” The Mishna goes on to explain that the women used to try to convince the assembled men that they were the right match for them. Meaning Yom Kippur was one of the two days a year that shidduchim were made and this was a cause for great happiness.

Aside from the fact that they obviously didn’t spend all day in shul on Yom Kippur, how can we possibly reconcile this custom with our current view of Yom Kippur? How can Yom Kippur be an appropriate day to be forming shidduchim and thereby redefining Yom Kippur as one of the two happiest days of the year?

Yom Kippur is the one day of the year when we must focus on becoming who we really are as well as who we want to be. In other words, we shouldn’t try to merely change negative behaviors; they are simply symptomatic of deeper core issues. As long as we are only trying to change behaviors, instead on focusing on the core issues, we will be unsuccessful. Behavior modifications only work for a limited time at best. This is why people say that it is easy to stop smoking, they have done it a hundred times. Without getting in touch with the “real you” and resolving to be that person, trying to effect permanent change is nearly impossible.

The real work on Yom Kippur isn’t about repetitively repeating the sins you have committed. The real work is internal, that of committing yourself to being a person who expects to lead a different type of life. Of course, you have to be open about the current wrong doings and accept responsibility; by both regretting those sinful acts and vowing to never repeat them. However, if we want those commitments to stick with us, we must perceive ourselves differently and define ourselves in that manner.

Similarly, it has been said that within every fat person there is a thin person trying to get out. Meaning that if we connect to who we really are, then we will understand that we don’t want to behave in this manner again.

This isn't to say that we will be perfect in the future, after all we are still human. But our mistakes of the future won't be because we are resigned to our sinful existence and therefore sin yet again. Rather, each event that we face will be a test of resolve with our new self-definition. Some tests (hopefully most) we will pass, while others will make us stumble. It is for these new "stumbles" that we will once again apologize to Hashem for on Yom Kippur and resolve to work on ourselves to eliminate those mistakes in the following year.

This is the reason that Yom Kippur is the most appropriate day for shidduchim. Yom Kippur is a day when we are supposed to get in touch with the real person within us, i.e. the highest quality and best person that we can be. If we are successful in connecting to that higher level within ourselves, then that is the ultimate time to go find and choose a mate. Choosing a mate that matches with the best possible version of yourself helps lock in that self improvement change for the rest of your life.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah Yom Kippur : Guaranteed happiness in 5783?

28 September 2022

How can we all guarantee that we'll be happy in 5783?

Our Yom Kippur Kol Nidrei evening service commences with a verse from Psalm 97:

"Ohr zarua letzadik, uleyishrei lev simcha." "Light is sown for the righteous, and happiness for those who are upright in their hearts."

So here's the answer! We should be amongst the 'yishrei lev' – people who are upright and just, who do the right thing, and that will bring us simcha – constant happiness.

Does this really make sense? Do we not know numerous people who are outstanding, righteous individuals and yet they have a lot of misery in their lives?

Such a difficulty with this message of the Psalms arises out of thinking that happiness is what is known in Hebrew as 'sasson'. Sasson is elation. Sasson is when you're laughing out loud, or beaming with a

smile. But the verse is speaking about 'simcha'. And what is simcha?

The answer comes in the Ethics of the Fathers 4:1:

"Eizeh hu ashir? Hasameach bechelko." – "Who is truly wealthy? It is somebody who has simcha, happiness in their portion."

A further verse is brought to support this as it says, *"Yagia kapeicha ki tochel, ashreicha vetov lach." – "When you eat the fruits of your labour, you are happy and it is good for you."*

So the message here is that in order to attain happiness, two things need to happen: First of all you need to eat the fruits of your labour. Do a lot. Achieve much. And that inner joy can never be taken away from you – even if you're miserable for other reasons, internally you will have simcha arising out of what you have attained.

In addition, when you know that what you have done is right, you will always have simcha. Even if you've become a bit unpopular because of it. Even if some people dislike you for what you've done. If you have stood by your principles to guarantee that the right thing has been achieved, you will feel a lot of simcha. You'll be at one with yourself and able to sleep at night.

That is why at the beginning of Yom Kippur we say 'uleyishrei lev simcha' inspiring us hopefully during the coming year to do two things: First of all, to achieve much, to be constructive, to be productive so that as a result we'll feel good and secondly, to always do what is right and if that's what you achieve – uleyishrei lev simcha – may you indeed be blessed with constant joy.

May this coming year be one of joy and happiness, much achievement and productivity for the entire Jewish people and may all of our world be blessed with happiness and peace.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayeilech Hakhel Demonstrates the Centrality of Torah

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of 'Hakhel'. Once every seven years, following the end of the Shmita (the agricultural Sabbatical) year (like this year—the beginning of 5783—which also follows the end of Shmita), the King gathered all of Bnei Yisroel (who were already in Yerushalayim to celebrate Succos) and read to them from the book of Devarim.

The Sefer HaChinuch writes, concerning any person who neglects this mitzvah, for example a Jew who fails to attend or a King who fails to read the Torah, "...their punishment is very great, for this commandment is a fundamental pillar of the religion..."

We might not assume that Hakhel is such an important mitzvah. 'Hakhel,' is a mitzvas aseh (positive commandment) that is only performed once every seven years. We might assume that Lulav or Matzah or Tefillin or Krias Shema are more important mitzvos. Yet, the Sefer HaChinuch does not write regarding those mitzvos, "and their punishment is very great..."

What significance does the Chinuch see in this mitzvah? Rav Yitzchok Hutner (1907-1980, Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivta Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin), in a lengthy introduction to a reprint of the Ramo's Darkei Moshe HaAruch, provides an insight into the mitzvah of Hakhel, including why it is so important. He bases his thesis on two inferences from the Rambam.

The Rambam (in Hilchos Chagiga 3:3) lists the sequence of the chapters in Devarim that were read by Hakhel: "From the beginning of the book of Devarim until the end of the parsha of Shema; then skip to V'haya im Shemoa. Then skip to 'Asser T'asser' and read in sequence until the end of the 'Blessings and Curses' until the words 'besides the Covenant which He entered into with them at Chorev' and then stop (u'posek)."

Rav Hutner asks, why does the Rambam need to add the word "u'posek"? If the Rambam says we need to read from here to there and he specifies the last words, then obviously, that is where we stop. Why does he make a point of stating "And that is where he stops"? In addition, the Rambam in Hilchos Chagiga (3:7) refers to Hakhel as "Yom Hakhel" (The Day of Hakhel). This is a strange expression, which the Talmud does not use. What is the Rambam trying to tell us?

Rav Hutner says that the essence of the ceremony of Hakhel is supposed to be the reenactment of ma'mad (standing at) Har Sinai. It is the reenactment of Kabalas HaTorah. Accepting the Torah is THE seminal event in Jewish History. In order to emphasize the importance of Torah to the Jewish People, we reenact Kabalas HaTorah every seven years. We want the people to feel as though they have experienced another Kabalas HaTorah.

A few weeks ago, Baltimore celebrated the reenactment of the Battle of Baltimore, a seminal event in American history, which included the composition of the Star-Spangled Banner. For Baltimoreans, and for all Americans, that is a very important event. How does someone commemorate that event? How does someone make it live? How does someone make future generations feel how important it was "that the flag was still there?" By reenacting it.

L'Havdil, there is something that is unbelievably important to us. That something is Kabalas HaTorah. We want everyone to relive that 'Standing at Har Sinai'. How do we do that? By getting everyone together and reading the Torah.

That is why the Rambam adds the word "u'posek". The words immediately preceding "u'posek" are "until the words 'besides the Covenant He entered into with them at Chorev (Mt. Sinai)'"'. We want those words to remain ringing in the people's ears! We want to conjure up lasting memories of Chorev, of Har Sinai. Therefore, the King must dramatically stop his reading right there. Reading one more word beyond 'Chorev' would dilute the impact, destroying the whole point of Hakhel.

That is also why the Rambam refers to Hakhel as 'Yom Hakhel'. Rav Hutner points out that if we take away the vowels of 'Yom Hakhel' the letters are precisely the same letters as 'Yom HaKahal' (the Day of the Congregation), which the Torah repeatedly uses (Devorim 9:10, 10:4, 18:16) to refer to ma'mad Har Sinai.

This indicates that Hakhel is a form of reenactment of Kabalas HaTorah. Why? Because as Rav Sadyah Gaon says, "Our Nation is not a Nation except through Torah." For some, the idea that 'We Are a Nation Because of Torah' is a chiddush gadol (great novelty). There have been thousands and millions of Jews who have not always believed that. There have been Jews who believed that we are a Nation by virtue of a land and without a land we are not a Nation. Says Rav Sadyah Gaon, "No; We are a Nation only through Torah."

There are some people who believe we are a nation through our language. There were some people who believed that the key to the Jewish people was Yiddish: Yiddish plays and Yiddish songs and Yiddish events. They are no longer around. The only people still around, who, in fact, read or speak

Yiddish, are the people that they thought would never make it.

There are people who think we are a Nation through our culture. No! Our Nation is not a nation except through Torah. That is what makes us a people. That is what binds us together. Standing together at Sinai; Accepting Torah; Learning Torah. That is what makes us Jews. The Torah, the mitzvos, nothing else. Not culture, not language, not land, not history, nothing—except Torah. This is the message of Hakhel.

Now we need to wonder... If the point of this mitzvah is to bring home the centrality of Torah to Jews, when would we expect this once-in-seven-years event to be scheduled?

I will tell you in which year I would not schedule Hakhel. I would not schedule Hakhel after the Shmita year. That is seemingly when you need Hakhel the least.

What did they do during the Shmita year? What happened in an agrarian society during a year when they could not plant, sow or harvest? They sat and learned Torah for an entire year. That was the nature of the Shmita year. The Jews recharged their spiritual batteries, learning most of the day. There was nothing else to do.

So, after they just finished an entire year of learning, and they now vividly appreciate the importance of learning, is that really the time when we need a ‘Hakhel’? Is that when the king needs to, again, read the Torah to them? Is it not enough that they have been learning Torah for the entire year? Now is the time when they need to learn more?

There is a lesson in this. The lesson is that someone who really loves something, can never get enough of it. Someone may have learned the entire year, but this—Hashem says—is when I want you to learn more Torah. It is precisely now that you can learn the lesson that there is never such a thing as getting enough of Torah, or getting tired of Torah.

I hate to give this example, but come and see. “We toil and they toil...”

What happens on December 31 and January 1? People sit down and watch the first football game. They go to sleep, having just finished one game. Then they get up the next morning and watch the first bowl game of the day. Then by 12 o’clock, there is another game and by 4 o’clock there is another game. And then, the night of January 1, there is another game! After someone has seen the Cotton Bowl, the Sugar Bowl, and the Rose Bowl, does he really need the Fiesta Bowl?

And yet, millions and millions of people, after having watched it an entire day, want one more game. People pay millions of dollars to advertise during that last game because they know people will watch it! Why? Because if someone loves football, he can never get enough of football. If someone really loves something, he can never have enough.

That is what Hakhel is. Hakhel says “Yidden! Torah is central to being a Jew. Our Nation is not a Nation without Torah. And we need to love it, to almost be addicted to it. Even if we have had a solid year of Torah, we still want another vort, another shiur, another kashe and teretz—we want more—because it is so central to our lives.”

At the time of the year when we think, “how can we make next year better?” there is always one area that is open to everyone: A person can always find more time for learning. That is the message of Hakhel: There can never be enough of Torah learning; because it is so central, so vital, and because Our Nation is not a Nation except through Torah.

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Vayelech - The Harder They Fall

Ben-Tzion Spitz

Strength instead of being the lusty child of passion, grows by grappling with and subduing them. - James Barrie

Perhaps one of the greatest leaders the nation of Israel ever had, after Moses, is his successor, Joshua. Joshua is prominent early in the biblical narrative. We see Moses selecting Joshua to lead the Israelite armed forces against the Amalekite ambush shortly after the Exodus from Egypt. Throughout the desert journey, we see Joshua at Moses’ right hand, his aide-de-camp, his devoted disciple.

God Himself names Joshua as Moses’ successor when Moses pleads with Him to ensure that Israel will continue to have a mortal leader after God decrees his death. Joshua is the divinely ordained successor to Moses and his subsequently miraculous and powerful conquest of the kings of Canaan prove his suitability for the role.

However, the Chidushei HaRim on Deuteronomy 31:7, wonders as to a particular refrain that is repeated constantly regarding Joshua. Moses and then later God, as well as the nation of Israel, repeatedly tell Joshua “Be strong and of good courage” – Chazak ve’ematz. Why does Joshua, who was clearly a great man, need such repeated encouragement? It would make more sense to offer a weak, untried leader such ongoing support. Why did a proven, accomplished, and seasoned leader such as Joshua require such reassurance?

The Chidushei HaRim posits that it was actually Joshua’s greatness that was his Achilles Heel. Joshua was such a great man, that the slightest infraction might have spelled his doom. When one reaches the level of the fully righteous, the smallest sin stands in stark contrast to their otherwise saintly behavior and can bring with it significant negative consequences.

A greater person is held to a greater standard. The Chidushei HaRim states that if such a person were to deviate as much as a hairsbreadth from God’s directive, it could completely doom them. Therefore, ironically, the greater a person is, the more protection and support they require. Hence the need for the repeated instances of God, Moses and the nation supporting Joshua with the refrain of Chazak ve’ematz, be strong and of good courage.

May we all be providers and recipients of strength and support, no matter what level of greatness we’re currently at.

Shabbat Shalom and Gmar Chatima Tova

Dedication - To Eviation’s first test flight of their prototype all-electric airplane.

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Vayelech – 5783

Repentance, Guilt, and Responsibility

As in previous parashot, this week’s Torah portion of Vayelech mentions the topic of teshuva, repentance. It’s interesting because in the way we read the Torah that is customary today, these parashot are read every year before Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur when we are focused on repentance and repairing our ways. It wasn’t always so. Until about one thousand years ago, the custom in the Land of Israel was triennial. The

Torah was divided into even more than 150 parashot and was read over the course of three or three and a half years. Gradually, the Babylonian custom spread among Jewish communities around the world, and today, in all Jewish communities, it is customary to read Parashat Vayelech on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashana, or – like this year – on the Shabbat after Rosh Hashana called Shabbat Shuva.

Rabbi Jonah of Girona lived in Spain in the 13th century. His classic book, The Gates of Repentance, deals with seeking atonement. He did not gear his words to Jews who were not believers, but to Jews of faith who felt the need to improve themselves. This book is still learned in yeshivas and was of great influence on The Musar Movement (a Jewish ethical, educational, and cultural movement active in Eastern Europe from the mid-19th century).

Rabbi Jonah started his book with the following sentences:

Among the good things which God, may He be blessed, has bestowed upon His creations is the path which He prepared for them to ascend from the baseness of their actions, to escape the trap of their inequities... He has taught them and warned them to return to Him when they sin against Him... [Even] if they greatly sin and rebel and act like treacherous betrayers – He does not close the doors of repentance to them... (The Gates of Repentance 1)

He sees repentance as an obligation, and even more so – as an opportunity. Man is called upon to turn a new page, repair his ways, and not stay “stuck” in bad habits but to move forward and live a proper life.

One of the principles of repentance is viduy, confession. This is the time of year now when we say selichot (penitential prayers). As part of selichot, we recite a short confession. On Yom Kippur, we elaborate on this and recite a long and detailed confession. But during selichot, we suffice with a short confession that is customarily said every day of the year.

What is this viduy? It is tempting to see it as self-blame, but Judaism does not seek the guilty. Even a person who has acquired bad habits that he is trying to rid himself of is not told to blame himself. The viduy is a call to accept responsibility. By reciting it, we are courageously facing our actions and honestly saying: I have indeed sinned; I behaved inappropriately and I am interested in finding a way to change my ways.

Judaism wants us to take responsibility for our actions and for society. It pushes us to stop stroking our

damaged ego and to stop wallowing in self-guilt. The great call stemming from the commandment to repent is: Take responsibility for your fate! Take responsibility for your surroundings! Choose how you really want to live your life!

These days in the Jewish calendar years are great ones. We call them Yamim Nora'im, Days of Awe. They are days of introspection and soul-searching. We just experienced the prayers and shofar blowing on Rosh Hashana and now we approach Yom Kippur – the incredible day when we complete the annual repentance process, the journey of cleansing our soul, and merit forgiveness and atonement. The Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur offers us the opportunity to stop and pay attention, to sit with our family and examine our interpersonal relationships. Is our marriage healthy and nurturing? Is our parenting fulfilling our expectations? Are we investing the efforts needed to bequeath Jewish heritage to the following generations? These are the questions that should preoccupy us this Shabbat, with optimism and faith, and with gratitude for this opportunity to repair and improve ourselves.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Rav Kook Torah

Yom Kippur: The Value of Life

Rabbi Chanan Morrison

We conclude the על חטא confessional prayers of Yom Kippur with the following declaration:

אֲלֹהֵי, עַד שֶׁלֹּא נִצְרַתִּי אִינִי כְדָאִי. וְעַכְשָׁיו שֶׁנִּצְרַתִּי כְּאֵלֹהֵי לֹא נִצְרַתִּי.

“My God, before I was formed, I was of no worth. And now that I have been formed, it is as if I was not formed.”

The Talmud (Berachot 17a) records that fourth-century scholar Rava composed this prayer, but its meaning is unclear. Before I was formed, of course I was of no worth - I did not exist yet! And after I was formed - why does it say that “it is as if I was not formed”? Do I exist or not?

My Life's Goal

This short prayer gives us an important insight into the meaning of our existence.

“Before I was formed, I was of no worth.” Clearly, before I was born I was not needed in this world. “I was of no worth” - nothing required my existence, there was no mission for me to fulfill. Since I was not

yet needed in the world, I was not born in an earlier generation.

“And now that I have been formed” - since my soul has entered the world at this point in time, it must be that now there is some mission for me to accomplish. I am needed to repair and complete some aspect of the world.

And yet, “it is as if I was not formed.” Were I to dedicate my life to fulfilling the purpose for which I was brought into the world, this would confirm and justify my existence. But since my actions are not in accordance with my true goal, I am not accomplishing my life's mission. And if I fail to fulfill my purpose in life, my very existence is called into question.

If I do not accomplish the mission for which I was placed in this world, then the situation has reverted back to its state before my birth, when, since I was not needed in the world, I was not yet formed. Thus, even now that I have been formed, it is regrettably “as if I was not formed.”

The Message for Yom Kippur

It is highly significant that this prayer was added to the Yom Kippur confession. After we have recognized and admitted our many faults and mistakes, we might conclude that we cause more harm than good, and would be better off retiring to the privacy of our homes. Rava's prayer teaches that we have a mission to accomplish, and it is critical that we discover this mission and work toward fulfilling it. Otherwise, tragically, “it is as if I was not formed.”

(Silver from the Land of Israel pp. 77-78. Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. II, p. 356)

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Parashas Vayeilech

פרשת וילך תשפ"ג

הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף... למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו... ובניהם אשר לא ידעו ישמעו ולמדו ליראה את

Gather together the people, the men, the women and the small children... so that they will hear and so that they will learn... and their children who do not know – they shall hear and they shall learn to fear Hashem. (31:12,13)

Sforno comments concerning the young children's hearing and learning, “The young children assembled at the time of *Hakhel*, who are too young to

be capable of appreciating the words read by the king, will nonetheless sense that something of significance is transpiring. Eventually, they will inquire and learn as they mature, for their curiosity and desire to know will have been aroused.” This explanation illuminates the practical benefit of attending the *Hakhel* for young people. The experience will ultimately cause them to pursue the Torah’s teachings when they mature and become capable of absorbing its lessons.

We have no idea what the mind can grasp and what remains indelibly ingrained in one’s subconscious. *Horav Chaim Zaitschek, zl*, cites *Chazal* (*Shabbos* 68a) who teach that a young child that was taken captive by pagans, during which he transgressed a multitude of prohibitions, a child who knew neither what a Jew is nor what his obligations are, will one day, when he is reinstated and made aware of his heritage, bring a sin-offering for each transgression. Mindboggling! The child knew nothing. Why should he be obligated to offer a *korban chatas al shiggegaso*, sin-offering, for his inadvertent sin? *Rav Zaitchik* explains that something, a *mah she’hu*, minimal, insignificant amount, remained engraved in his subconscious mind, something he heard, saw, experienced when he was but an infant – which will remain with him, regardless of the environment that he is in. Once he matures, his subconscious will come to the fore and motivate him to seek clarity concerning what is “bothering” him.

We find throughout *Chazal* (*Yerushalmi Kesubos* 5:6), that our sages relate events that occurred, or identities of people whom they saw as infants. It meant nothing then, but, years later, it arouses questions and inspires life lessons. We know neither what the eye sees nor what the mind grasps, but obviously the Torah feels that a spiritual experience can impact the mind of even the youngest child. It is like a seed that germinates and takes hold over time, until it bursts forth as a finished product. Every opportunity to avail our children of wholesome, spiritual experiences should be embraced. Furthermore, when they spend their free time exposed to foolishness (however kosher) via media, this is what will fill their subconscious and motivate their minds. Honestly, it is a “no-brainer.”

ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת

So now, write this song for yourselves. (31:19)

The *Rambam* in *Hilchos Tefillin, Mezuzah V’Sefer Torah* (7:1) writes, “It is a *mitzvah* from the Torah incumbent upon each and every *Yid* to write a

Sefer Torah for himself, as it says in the *pasuk*, “*V’atah kisvu lachem es ha’Shirah ha’zos.*” (Since one cannot write *parshiyos*, chapters of the Torah, at various intervals and put them together, the exhortation to write *Shiras Haazinu* implies that it should be written as part of the entire Torah.) “Even if his forbears left him a *Sefer Torah*, he still has a *mitzvah* to write his own *Sefer Torah*. If he writes it with his own hand, it is considered as if he received it (from Hashem) on Har Sinai!”

“Even if his forebears left him a *Sefer Torah*,” his son must initiate personally, or by agent, to write his own *Sefer Torah*. Why? If he has his father’s *Sefer Torah*, why must he write another one? The *K’sav Sofer* explains that the *mitzvah* to write his own *Sefer Torah* is to protect the son from becoming complacent with Torah. It is important to remember the past and connect with it, but... he must also do his own thing. Add his own initiative, so that he has his own *chelek*, portion, in the Torah.

We can extrapolate from here to other *mitzvos* and Jewish practice and observance in general. It is wonderful to carry on the traditions and rituals of the past, but one must build on them; otherwise, he risks the danger of complacency. If one’s father would learn a *Mishnah* between *Minchah/Maariv*, the son should attend a *shiur* in *Gemorah*. If his father sang one *niggun* at the *Shabbos* table, he should build on it and sing a repertoire of songs. When one learns, it is appropriate to recall and relate the questions and explanations of his *rebbeim*. He should add his own *chiddushim*, original thoughts, thus building on the foundation of Torah learning that inspired him.

One who writes his own *Sefer Torah* is tantamount to being at *Har Sinai* and receiving the Torah from Hashem. The Almighty gave us the Torah to learn, to be *mechadesh*, to build upon it, to plumb its depths and uncover its myriad secrets. This, too, is a form of writing one’s own *Sefer Torah*. The Torah was meant to be studied on every level. It was not meant to be a relic that is stored in the Ark, to be removed only when necessary. It is our life. Without it, life is mere existence.

ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדו את בני ישראל

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

The *shirah*, song, to which the Torah is referring is *Shiras Haazinu*, which is called a song because it is written in the form of poetic verse. The *Rambam* (*Hilchos Sefer Torah* 7:1) implies from here

that it is a *mitzvah* for every Jew to write a *Sefer Torah* for himself. Although the Torah here says only to write a song, it is incumbent on us to write the entire Torah. It seems that the Torah is being written in order to write *Shiras Haazinu*. Why should the *mitzvah* of *kesivas Sefer Torah*, writing a Torah scroll, be presented in such a roundabout manner?

Furthermore, we are allowed to write the individual *parshios* of *Tefillin* and *Mezuzah* which are later inserted in their cases. What about the prohibition of writing individual *parshios*? Furthermore, in the time of the *Bais HaMikdash*, the *Parashas Sotah*, dealing with the wayward wife, is written separately. What is different about *Shiras Haazinu* that it cannot be written unless it is part of an entire *Sefer Torah*?

Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, suggests that we focus on the reason stated by the Torah for writing *Shiras Haazinu*, “So that this song shall be for Me a witness against *Bnei Yisrael*.” The function of the song is to bear witness, to attest to the Jewish People’s observance of the Torah. Clearly, in order to bear witness, it is incumbent that we be proficient in the entire Torah, concerning which the *Shirah* will testify. Without the Torah, we would be hard-pressed to know that when Hashem decrees punishment, it is in retribution for our lack of compliance to the Torah’s demands. Hashem’s will is stated in the Torah. He informs us what He expects of us. If we have no Torah, we can hardly know the correct manner of observance. Without the “book of directions,” it is difficult to use the appliance appropriately.

Without Torah as one’s guide, his desire to grow and excel spiritually will be impeded. On the contrary, he may stray (through no fault of his own, other than a lack of Torah knowledge) and perform totally wicked actions. The generation of Enosh, who began worshipping idols, made the grave error of thinking that it was Hashem’s will that they worship His celestial bodies. Perhaps they meant well, but, without the illumination of the Torah, they groped in the darkness until they perpetrated the most infamous treason against Hashem. This misconduct is the product of Torah ignorance. Such unawareness, unfortunately, produces similar results in any other area that we might attempt to serve Hashem.

Thus, explains *Rav Moshe*, the command to write the song is really a command to write the entire Torah, to study it and become fully proficient in it. In this manner, when we come across the punishments

expressed in the song which are the consequences of our lack of observance, we will be able to look in the Torah and learn how to expiate our sins and correct our ways.

ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת

So now, write this song for yourselves. (31:19)

The last *mitzvah* in the Torah is the command to write a *Sefer Torah*. This *mitzvah* is incumbent upon everyone. If one cannot personally write a *Sefer Torah*, he should commission its writing. The *poskim* teach that any *sefer*, especially one which is a collection of his own *chiddushim*, original thoughts, has greater significance. Furthermore, one who is unable to write should designate a room in his house to serve as a study which houses his *seforim*. Indeed, the most important room in his home should be where his *seforim* are kept. We are the People of the Book. We should value its significance.

Why is the *mitzvah* of writing a *Sefer Torah* the last *mitzvah*? One would think that it would be the first *mitzvah*. After all, one who goes to school to study a profession would be expected to have his books before he commences the course of study. Why should the Torah be different? I think the Torah is teaching us that one must first study and be proficient in the Torah. Otherwise, he will not appreciate its value. One who does not value the Torah will hardly take the *mitzvah* of writing it seriously.

The dedication of a newly-written Torah scroll is traditionally celebrated amid great festivity. The source of this celebration heralds back to the Biblical account of David *HaMelech* welcoming the *Aron HaKodesh* back to Yerushalayim. David danced with all his might, as he enthusiastically gave honor to the Torah. The celebrations often vary from community to community and in how much one is prepared to extend himself. The one area that should not vary is concerning the quality of the parchment, the actual writing of the letters and the suitability of the *sofer*, scribe. One who writes a Torah has an enormous responsibility; thus, he must be of impeccable character and spiritual rectitude. The *Sefer Torah* symbolizes our relationship with Hashem. It goes without saying that its *kashrus* must be paramount.

A well-known *askan*, communal personality, who was involved in many organizations and reached out to assist those in need, regardless of their affiliation with a specific brand of Orthodoxy, took upon himself to commission the writing of a *Sefer Torah*. It had always been his dream to do something

personally for the Torah. He went out of his way to arrange to have the Torah written by one of the finest, most credible *sofrim* on parchment that was flawless. It took some time and ultimately ended up costing more than he had initially expected, but the finished product was an absolute, unblemished beauty. Indeed, it was so perfect that it was hard to believe it was the work of a human being. On the day of the culmination of the writing, the last few letters were to be filled in by dignitaries and close family friends. Among them was *Horav Mordechai Zukerman, zl (Mashgiach, Yeshivas Chevron)*, and another *Rav* from Yerushalayim. When it came the turn for the *Rav* to fill in his letter, his sleeve caught on the bottle of wine which had been prepared for the *l'chaim* and the unthinkable happened: some wine spilled on the white border of the last *yeriah*, sheet of parchment. Not only was the parchment now stained, the odor of wine that emanated from the parchment was clearly evident.

One can only begin to imagine the feelings of disconcertment that overwhelmed the *Rav*. He was acutely aware of the effort and expense that the host had expended in order to produce such a fine *Sefer Torah*, and he had spilled wine on the last sheet. Incidentally, the host said nothing concerning the occurrence. He understood and accepted the fact that the last sheet would need to be replaced. After the incident, the *Rav* accompanied *Rav Zuckerman* home. The *Mashgiach* noticed the pain written all over his friend's face and remarked, "I have a tradition (which he had heard from earlier *gedolim*, Torah giants. He had been the student of both the *Chafetz Chaim, zl*, and *Horav Avraham Grodzenski, zl*). When one acts in good faith, with noble intentions, no *takalah*, mishap, will result from it. Do you hear me? Nothing adverse will arise from it. Everything is guided from Heaven Above. You will see that (the spilling of the wine) whatever occurred was for a reason. Everything is only for the good!"

The next morning, a festive celebration took place in honor of the new Torah scroll. It was a large gathering that included distinguished personages, friends and family. Indeed, people from all walks of life joined in this *seudas mitzvah*, celebratory meal, following the fulfillment of a *mitzvah*. The *Rav* and *Rav Zuckerman* were among the invitees. The *Rav* just sat pensively, reviewing what had occurred the previous night. As in all grand dinners, there were speakers and speakers. One of the last men to speak was a cousin who had come in from America

especially for the occasion. He said, "I am a Holocaust survivor, and, as such, I have lost my faith in Hashem (*chas v'shalom*, Heaven forbid). I went through much and witnessed atrocities that defy human rationale. Nonetheless, out of respect and admiration for my relative, I came to join in his celebration (although it means nothing to me). I even wrote a letter in the Torah!"

As soon as the man said this, *Rav Zuckerman* looked at the *Rav* and said, "See, I told you that the wine was spilled for a reason! This man has just declared publicly that he is a nonbeliever. Hence, he is an *apikores*, guilty of heresy. As such, the letter that he filled in is *pasul*, invalid. That last *yeriah* would have had to be changed. Who knows when his lack of beliefs would have been discovered? Hashem protected His Torah, and He used you as His vehicle. If Hashem causes a *takalah* to happen to a person, it is for a good reason and serves a noble purpose."

וְהָיָה כִּי תִמְצָאן אוֹתוֹ רַעוֹת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת וְעִנְיָהּ הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לִפְנֵינוּ לְעַד

It shall be that when many evils and distresses come upon it, then this song will speak up before it as a witness. (31: 21)

The word *v'hayah*, it shall be, is used to imply *simchah*, joy. We wonder what the portent of *ra'os rabos v'tzaros*, many evils and distresses, has to do with joy? On the surface, it comes across as a period which clearly does not denote *simchah*. *Horav Yitzchak Yedidyah Frankel, zl (Rav of Tel Aviv)*, offers an inspiring explanation for the placement of the term *v'hayah* in connection with *tzaros rabos*. He quotes *Chazal (Pesichta Eichah Rabbah)* who relate a powerful dialogue that ensued between *Avraham Avinu* and "representatives" of the *alef-beis*, Hebrew alphabet.

The *Midrash* relates *Avraham Avinu's* defense of the Jewish People. He asked the Almighty, "Why did You exile my children and deliver them into the hands of the other nations, who have killed them with all sorts of unusual deaths? You destroyed the *Bais Hamikdash*, the place where I offered up my son, *Yitzchak*, as an *olah*, offering, before You?"

Hashem replied, "Your children sinned and have transgressed the entire Torah and all the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet that are in it." *Avraham* countered, "*Ribbono Shel Olam*, who attested to Your children's sinful behavior?" Hashem replied, "Let the Torah come forward to testify against

the Jewish people.” The Torah came forward and reiterated Hashem’s accusation against the people.

Avraham said to the Torah, “My daughter, you come to condemn the Jewish People of transgressing your precepts? Do you not remember the day that all refused to accept you? It was only *Klal Yisrael* who immediately responded with *Naaseh V’Nishmah*, ‘We will do and we will listen.’ They accepted the commandments unequivocally. Now you come forward during their period of travail. Is this how you reward them for staying by you?” When the Torah heard this, it moved to the side, refusing to testify against the people.

Hashem then called the twenty-two letters of the alphabet to testify against the people. The *aleph* stepped forward to censure the people. Avraham said to the *alef*, “You are the first letter and you have come to testify against the Jewish People during their anguish. Do you not remember that auspicious day that Hashem revealed Himself on *Har Sinai* and said, *Anochi Hashem* (with the *aleph* of *Anochi*), and no nation was willing to accept – except for the Jewish People. And you come to testify against them?” The *aleph* moved aside and did not testify.

The *bais* was called up. Avraham spoke before the *bais* had a chance to denounce the people. “My daughter, you are coming to testify against the people who are diligent in all of the Five Books of the Torah? You are the first letter of the Torah (*Bais – Bereishis*). [The Jewish people have been committed to you, and you come to testify against them?]” Understandably, the *bais* moved aside. Hashem called the letter *gimmel*, which fared no better. Avraham brought up the *mitzvah* of *Tzitzis* which begins with the letter *gimmel*: *Gedillim taaseh lach*, “You shall all make for yourself twisted threads” (*Devarim* 32:12). The *gimmel* moved aside and did not testify against *Klal Yisrael*. Once this occurred, the other letters of the alphabet followed suit. Hence, the Torah, with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, came out in support of *Klal Yisrael*. This is the reason that the Torah writes, *v’hayah*, a term which denotes joy,

because what greater reason to rejoice than to know that we have the Torah’s protection?

Va’ani Tefillah

מהר יקדמונו רחמיך כי דלונו מאד – *Maheir yikadmunu rachamecha ki dalonu me’od*. Your mercies meet us swiftly, for we have become exceedingly impoverished.

Chazal (*Megillah* 13b) teach that Hashem does not strike *Klal Yisrael* unless He has already prepared the *refuah*, cure/antidote. Concerning the nations of the world, however, Hashem first strikes them, and afterwards prepares the *refuah*. Why is it that we apparently need the *refuah* prior to the *makkah*? *Horav Yosef Chaim, zl, m’Bagdad*, explains that when Hashem performs a *neis*, miracle, to save us, or mitigate the punishment to which we are subjected, it comes with a price, indeed a heavy one. Every mitigation constitutes a “withdrawal” from our *z’chuyos*, merits/savings. We earn merit for the *mitzvos* and good deeds that we perform. These *z’chuyos* stand in our behalf when necessary, when the punishment is so grave that we would otherwise not survive. Unfortunately, we have just so much merit. How much can we afford to deplete? When Hashem prepares the *refuah* prior to issuing the *makkah*, it diminishes the degree of the *neis*. We do not need such an incredible *neis*, because our punishment is mitigated by the *refuah* that is in place. The nations of the world are not fortunate to have such a dynamic. Their punishment comes full force, since there is no cure – until later. Thus, whatever merit they have runs out quickly.

We say to Hashem, “Your mercies meet us swiftly,” thereby asking that He send the *refuah* before the *makkah*, because “we are exceedingly impoverished”; we have very little in our savings. We simply cannot afford to lose any more.

Sponsored in loving memory of Walter Frank ז"ל - אליהו בן לוי ז"ל

By his children and grandchildren, Birdie and Lenny Frank and Family

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לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע"ה