

Weekly Parsha HAAZINU
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

Our great teacher Moshe, in his concluding hymn regarding the future of the Jewish people, calls as his witnesses heaven and earth. These witnesses are, in human terms, eternal and omnipresent. They will always be there to testify that Moshe concluded a binding covenant between God and Israel, and that this covenant is a symbol of eternity and destiny.

Heaven and earth represent the physical world and the changing, yet seemingly unending nature of the planet that we inhabit. King Solomon taught us that all things human are subject to change and subject to new circumstances, but that the earth and its natural forces implanted within it from the moment of original creation, always remain the same.

One of the lessons that can easily be derived from this is how puny our strength is, in comparison to the forces of nature. Volcanoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, rains and drought are all part of regular occurrences in our lives and have been from the beginning of human existence. To this extent, human beings are always tempting fate, since we are always so vulnerable regarding these great natural forces. Operating beyond our control, and many times even beyond a minimum of our understanding, they are certainly beyond our ability to exactly predict when and if they will occur and affect our lives. Clearly, Moshe could not have found better witnesses that would bind us to our covenant than those which cannot be affected by us and are not subject to our pressures or influences.

The hymn on this week's Torah reading has been taught, over the centuries, to Jewish children and fixed in their memory bank. It is these words that haunt all Jewish history and create that feeling of angst and uncertainty that so characterizes the Jewish personality, especially in our time. The Jewish world today has far more physical riches and ostensible security than it ever has had, over the past numerous centuries. Yet, it appears that a sizable portion of the Jewish world is not happy with themselves, with the Jewish state, and, certainly, not with the Jewish religion and its Torah.

There appears to be a continuing and gnawing frustration and feeling of dissatisfaction that is present in our society, no matter how great our material blessings and social successes are. This lack of satisfaction is directly traceable to the words of the hymn that is the centerpiece of this week's Torah reading. Moshe guaranteed that this hymn, like the entire Torah itself, would never be forgotten, and, could never be eliminated from the Jewish memory bank and psyche. Thus, like the eternity of the witnesses – heaven and earth – to our covenant, this song of destiny is also one of unity, and one that will always be remembered - even if the memory of it many times is only subconscious. It becomes the secret of Jewish survival, and the impetus that guides us forward, many times against our own will and conscious knowledge.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

Let My Teaching Drop as Rain (Ha'azinu 5780)
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

In the glorious song with which Moses addresses the congregation, he invites the people to think of the Torah – their covenant with God – as if it were like the rain that waters the ground so that it brings forth its produce:

Let my teaching drop as rain,
My words descend like dew,
Like showers on new grass,

Like abundant rain on tender plants. (Deut. 32:2)

God's word is like rain in a dry land. It brings life. It makes things grow. There is much we can do of our own accord: we can plough the earth

and plant the seeds. But in the end our success depends on something beyond our control. If no rain falls, there will be no harvest, whatever preparations we make. So it is with Israel. It must never be tempted into the hubris of saying: "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me" (Deut. 8:17).

The Sages, however, sensed something more in the analogy. This is how Sifrei (a compendium of commentaries on Numbers and Deuteronomy dating back to the Mishnaic period) puts it:

Let my teaching drop as rain: Just as the rain is one thing, yet it falls on trees, enabling each to produce tasty fruit according to the kind of tree it is – the vine in its way, the olive tree in its way, and the date palm in its way – so the Torah is one, yet its words yield Scripture, Mishnah, laws, and lore. Like showers on new grass: Just as showers fall upon plants and make them grow, some green, some red, some black, some white, so the words of Torah produce teachers, worthy individuals, Sages, the righteous, and the pious.[1]

There is only one Torah, yet it has multiple effects. It gives rise to different kinds of teaching, different sorts of virtue. Torah is sometimes seen by its critics as overly prescriptive, as if it sought to make everyone the same. The Midrash argues otherwise. The Torah is compared to rain precisely to emphasise that its most important effect is to make each of us grow into what we could become. We are not all the same, nor does Torah seek uniformity. As a famous Mishnah puts it: "When a human being makes many coins from the same mint, they are all the same. God makes everyone in the same image – His image – yet none is the same as another" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).

This emphasis on difference is a recurring theme in Judaism. For example, when Moses asks God to appoint his successor, he uses an unusual phrase: "May the Lord, God of the spirits of all humankind, appoint a man over the community" (Num. 27:16). On this, Rashi comments:

Why is this expression ("God of the spirits of all humankind") used? [Moses] said to Him: Lord of the universe, You know each person's character, and that no two people are alike. Therefore, appoint a leader for them who will bear with each person according to his or her disposition.

One of the fundamental requirements of a leader in Judaism is that he or she is able to respect the differences between human beings. This is a point emphasised by Maimonides in Guide for the Perplexed:

Man is, as you know, the highest form in creation, and he therefore includes the largest number of constituent elements. This is why the human race contains so great a variety of individuals that we cannot discover two persons exactly alike in any moral quality or in external appearance.... This great variety and the necessity of social life are essential elements in man's nature. But the well-being of society demands that there should be a leader able to regulate the actions of man. He must complete every shortcoming, remove every excess, and prescribe for the conduct of all, so that the natural variety should be counterbalanced by the uniformity of legislation, so that social order be well established.[2]

The political problem as Maimonides sees it is how to regulate the affairs of human beings in such a way as to respect their individuality while not creating chaos. A similar point emerges from a surprising rabbinic teaching: "Our Rabbis taught: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, one says: Blessed Be He who discerns secrets – because the mind of each is different from that of another, just as the face of each is different from another" (Brachot 58a).

We would have expected a blessing over a crowd to emphasise its size, its mass: human beings in their collectivity.[3] A crowd is a group large enough for the individuality of the faces to be lost. Yet the blessing stresses the opposite – that each member of a crowd is still an individual with distinctive thoughts, hopes, fears, and aspirations.

The same was true for the relationship between the Sages. A Mishnah states:

When R. Meir died, the composers of fables ceased. When Ben Azzai died, assiduous students ceased. When Ben Zoma died, the expositors ceased. When R. Akiva died, the glory of the Torah ceased. When R. Chanina died, men of deed ceased. When R. Yose Ketanta died, the pious men ceased. When R. Yochanan b. Zakai died, the lustre of wisdom ceased.... When Rabbi died, humility and the fear of sin ceased. (Mishnah Sotah 9:15)

There was no single template of the Sage. Each had his own distinctive merits, his unique contribution to the collective heritage. In this respect, the Sages were merely continuing the tradition of the Torah itself. There is no single role model of the religious hero or heroine in Tanach. The patriarchs and matriarchs each had their own unmistakable character. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam each emerge as different personality types. Kings, Priests, and Prophets had different roles to play in Israelite society. Even among the Prophets, “No two prophesy in the same style,” said the Sages (Sanhedrin 89a). Elijah was zealous, Elisha gentle. Hosea speaks of love, Amos speaks of justice. Isaiah’s visions are simpler and less opaque than those of Ezekiel.

The same applies to even to the revelation at Sinai itself. Each individual heard, in the same words, a different inflection:

The voice of the Lord is with power (Ps. 29:4): that is, according to the power of each individual, the young, the old, and the very small ones, each according to their power [of understanding]. God said to Israel, “Do not believe that there are many gods in heaven because you heard many voices. Know that I alone am the Lord your God.”[4]

According to Maharsha, there are 600,000 interpretations of Torah. Each individual is theoretically capable of a unique insight into its meaning. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas commented:

The Revelation has a particular way of producing meaning, which lies in its calling upon the unique within me. It is as if a multiplicity of persons...were the condition for the plenitude of “absolute truth,” as if each person, by virtue of his own uniqueness, were able to guarantee the revelation of one unique aspect of the truth, so that some of its facets would never have been revealed if certain people had been absent from mankind.[5]

Judaism, in short, emphasises the other side of the maxim *E pluribus unum* (“Out of the many, one”). It says: “Out of the One, many.”

The miracle of creation is that unity in heaven produces diversity on earth. Torah is the rain that feeds this diversity, allowing each of us to become what only we can be.

Shabbat Shalom

Shabbat Shalom: Haazinu (Deuteronomy 32:1-32:52)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “The Lord remembered Sarah as he had promised... Sarah conceived and bore a son...” (Genesis 21:1-2)

Rosh Hashanah always portends new beginnings and fresh opportunities: “This day the world was born,” or at least the world beckons with possibilities of rebirth and renewal.

Hence I would have thought that Rosh Hashanah, the day on which we “enthroned” God as Lord of the Universes—and not Shmini Atzeret-Simhat Torah— would be the festival on which we should begin the new Torah reading cycle of the year, the most apt occasion for reopening our Book of Books with “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” And to do so would not even be much of a stretch; after all, we are certainly on target, having reached the last chapters of the final Book of Deuteronomy during our regular Shabbat readings at this time of year. So why have our Talmudic Sages ordained that we read of Isaac’s birth and sacrificial binding on the two days of Rosh Hashanah? However, on second thought, I believe I understand the deep wisdom of our Sages. Yes, Rosh Hashanah is probably the most universally oriented of all of our festivals, and yes, the Jews of Israel have certainly returned to the global family of nation-states after a hiatus of close to 2,000 years, taking center stage on the world arena. Nevertheless, the “world” which initially and most compellingly consumes most of our day-to-day

thoughts and activities is the more personal world of our individual families.

And perhaps, on an even deeper level, the building blocks of every national society are the individual families within the country’s borders; the Nation of Israel emerged from the family of Abraham! Moreover, it is the family that is the necessary medium of communicating a specific national narrative from generation to generation. God elected Abraham as the first Hebrew because he commanded his own children and his household after him to observe [be responsible for] the path of the Lord, to do acts of compassionate righteousness and moral justice. Indeed, virtually all of our familial feasts and celebrations are dedicated to nurturing and transmitting our national narrative, values and lifestyle to our children and grandchildren.

From this perspective, since the road to new beginnings must be paved by acts of repentance—Rosh Hashanah ushers in our 10 Days of Repentance—we must concentrate our repentance and our resolutions for change upon our sins against family, spouse and children, rather than our sins against God. It is easier, and less personally threatening, to objectively assess our personal standing before the Unseen Seer of the Universe than before the parents, spouses and children with whom we have personal dealings every single day.

Permit me three stories:

1. The Talmud (BT Rosh Hashanah 16) provocatively suggests that the various and numerous sounds of the shofar call to repentance are meant to confound Satan. Who is Satan? Another passage of the Talmud (BT Gittin 52) explains: “A certain couple lived in one dwelling together with Satan; every Friday night they would argue with each other. R. Meir entered the household and lived there for three consecutive Friday evenings until he made peace between them.

He heard Satan cry out, ‘Woe unto me; I have been forced out of the house because of R. Meir...’” Satan is family discord.

2. The Talmud further records (BT Brachot 8) the custom of one community that the morning after the wedding night, a friend of the groom would ask him, “Matza or Motzi?” “What kind of wife have you found? Which verse applies to you? Is it ‘one who has found [matza] a wife has found only good’ (Prov. 18:22), or is it ‘I find [motzi] that more bitter than death is the woman’ (Eccl.7:26).” What kind of question is this? It decries all prohibitions against slander. How dare the friend ask, and the groom answer, concerning the wife he has just married? I would suggest that the friend is asking the groom about the groom, not about his bride. Now that the wedding is over and your life together has just begun, who do you think about first when you arise in the morning? Is it “one who has found [matza] a wife,” your wife whom you are concerned about first, then you have “found only good”; but if it is “I find [motzi],” yourself that you think about first, then your life will be more bitter than death...”

3. When I was a young rabbi in Manhattan with a growing family, I got into a cab. During my conversation with the driver, a foreign immigrant who lived in a “slum” neighborhood, he told me he had been married to the same woman for 35 years, had four professional children and had never been schooled beyond the eighth grade. “To what do you owe your incredible success?” I asked. He explained: “As long as the children lived in the house, all of us had to be around the dinner table at 7 p.m., without radio, television or newspaper. Everyone had to tell the best moment of the day, and the worst moment of the day. That’s how I brought the family together, and was able to give over how important I think education is.”

I burst into tears; that taxi driver who never went past elementary school was much wiser than I...

Shabbat Shalom!

Drasha By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Call to Arms

Yom Kippur, the ultimate day of repentance, has the Jewish nation simultaneously praying, fasting and asking for forgiveness. It begins with the somber, quiet, and melodious intonation of Kol Nidrei and ends

with the entire congregation shouting Hashem hu HaElokim (G-d is the Al-Mighty) seven times after various requests of forgiveness. It seems that at the time when our strength is waning our greatest and loudest pleas are spent. Shouldn't we begin the day with the strong requests for forgiveness and save the subdued prayers for when our bodies are weak from hunger and our lips parched from lack of water?

Rav Eichenstein, the Ziditchover Rebbe, tells the following story:

One Friday, a man entered the study of the Tchartkover Rebbe with a request that was very common in those days.

"My son was drafted into the army," the man began. "However, we have a way out. On Sunday, we are going to a doctor who will falsely declare him unfit for service. This way he will be spared certain misery, perhaps even death in that terrible army. Rebbe," he asked, "I need your blessing that he evade the draft."

The Rebbe quietly told him that Shabbos was nearing and he could not concentrate on blessings. The man should return to him on Friday evening after his tisch (ceremonious chasidic table).

The man did so. After most of the chasidim had left, the man repeated his request, almost verbatim. Again the Rebbe was non-committal. "Return to me after the morning service."

Unperturbed, the man noted that he would really like to resolve this matter before Sunday morning.

Shabbos morning, after services, the man approached the Rebbe again. Calmly he repeated the predicament. "Sunday morning I am going to a doctor who will falsely declare my son unfit for military service. Please pray that we will evade conscription." The Rebbe was not moved. Again, he deferred until the afternoon.

At the third Shabbos meal, the scene repeated again, precisely the way it had the previous three times. "I understand that you are leaving Sunday morning. Come back to me late Saturday night," said the Rebbe. "By then I will have an answer for you."

By this time, his Chasidim's curiosity was piqued. They had never seen their Rebbe so reluctant to mete a blessing, especially when it was one that would save a Jewish soul from the frightful Polish army.

Saturday night a large crowd gathered as the man approached with his request. Frustrated and disgruntled, the man, once again, repeated his story, almost verbatim, for the fifth time.

Immediately, the Rebbe sprang from his chair and began to shout. "What are you asking me? Why would one even try to evade the service of our wonderful country? How dare you ask me for a blessing of that sort? Your son would make a fine soldier for our country. I wish him the best of luck in the army!"

The man quickly scurried from the room and left town. The Chasidim stood shocked and bewildered. Never had they heard such an uncharacteristic outcry from the Rebbe.

"I will explain," said the Rebbe. "The man was a fraud. He had no son, and if he did, he wanted him in the army. He was sent by the government to test our loyalty. Thank G-d we passed the test."

"But, Rebbe!" cried the chasidim, "how did you know?"

"Simple," explained the Rebbe. "I watched the level of intensity. From the moment he met me until tonight there was no increase in intensity nor feeling of desperation with each request. The moment I heard his request tonight and it contained no more passion or desperation than his first request on Friday night, I knew he was a fraud."

We stand a whole entire day in prayer, and end with a ne'ilah prayer, after nearly 24 hours of pleading. The litmus test of our sincerity comes as the heavenly gates are being closed. As the sun begins to set, our pleas should intensify. That crescendo assures our sincerity. It also should assure us a Happy & Healthy Sweet New Year.

Dedicated by Larry Atlas in honor of his engagement to Marcia Taitelman

Good Shabbos!

Ha'azinu: The Diversity of Israel

Rav Kook Torah

An anecdote relates how a certain Jew was stranded for many years on a deserted island. When he was finally rescued, he boasted of his many

accomplishments on the island, including the construction of two synagogues.

"Very impressive," responded his rescuers. "But why two synagogues?"

"This is the synagogue that I attend," explained the man, pointing at one structure. "The other one is the synagogue I refuse to step foot in."

The joke would not be humorous if it did not contain a kernel of truth. The Jewish people often seem to be "blessed" with an overabundance of infighting. Why is there so much division and conflict?

The Borders of the Nations

The song of Ha'azinu compares the heritage of Israel to that of the other nations of the world:

"When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance... He set up the borders of the nations, corresponding to the number of Israel's children." (Deut. 32:8)

What are these "borders of the nations"? And in what way do they correspond to the "number" of Jewish people?

Every nation is blessed with unique national traits. Each nation possesses special talents and makes a unique contribution to the world. This specialty may lie in the arts, sciences, organizational ability, and so on. The verse refers to these areas of specialization as "borders."

All of the talents that can be found among the nations of the world also exist in the "number" - that is, in the diversity - of the Jewish people. Historically, we have seen that Jews were always at the forefront of a remarkably diverse range of professions and disciplines.

Seventy Souls

The Midrash describes the diversity of Israel by comparing the size of Jacob's family who went down to Egypt - seventy souls - with the seventy nations of the world. This number represents the seventy archetypal souls, each with its own unique characteristics and talents. When God commanded Moses to organize leaders to govern the people, He told Moses to gather seventy elders (Num. 11:16). With these leaders, Moses brought together the people's diverse range of outlooks and natural gifts.

The multi-talented diversity of the Jewish people, however, has a downside; it makes them more prone to internal friction and conflict. Each talent strives to express itself fully, often at the expense of other talents. The Sages noted that "The greater the person, greater his evil inclination" (Sukkah 52a). This insight is true not only for the individual, but also for the nation. When a nation is blessed with great talents, it has a greater potential for internal strife.

The Floating Palace

The Midrash uses a striking image as a metaphor for the Jewish people. It compares the nation to a palace constructed on top of many boats. As long as the boats are tied together, the Midrash notes, the palace will remain secure.

It is natural for each boat to try to make its own separate way in the sea. It is only the palace on top that keeps the fleet of boats together and ensures that they sail together in the same direction.

What is this palace? It is the force that guards against internal strife and unifies the Jewish people - the Torah itself. In its highest state, the Torah encompasses all areas of knowledge. The seventy elders, representing the full range of souls, gathered together to unite the people under one flag, "to perfect the world under the reign of God" (from the Aleinu prayer).

Diverse disciplines are harmoniously united when they can emphasize their contribution to the common good, as developed and refined under the guidance of the Torah. Then the diversity of the Jewish people becomes a blessing, as the nation is united via the root of its inner being - the Torah.

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For the week ending 12 October 2019 / 13 Tishri 5780

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Insights

A Copper Penny

"For G-d's portion is His people; Yaakov is the measure of His heritage." (32:9)

Once there was a young boy standing in the courtyard of the shul in Vilna. He was bent over, his eyes scouring the pavement, searching intently for something. He looked here and there. Occasionally he would stoop lower and examine the ground to see if he could find what he was searching for. In frustration, tears began to well in his eyes.

The time came for mincha, the afternoon prayer, and the courtyard began to fill with people. They all noticed the little boy crying and searching. "What are you looking for?" they asked him. "My mother gave me a copper penny and I lost it on my way to cheder (school)," was the tearful reply. Everyone started to help him look for the copper penny. They scoured the courtyard. Not a single square inch was left unexamined.

It was not to be found.

Someone said to the little boy, "Show me exactly where you were when you lost it." In all innocence, the little boy replied: "Actually I didn't lose it here. I lost it in the street." "So why are you looking for it here in the courtyard of the shul?" came the startled reply. "Because the street is all muddy and dirty and I didn't want to soil my shoes."

The mystical sources teach us that there are many worlds above this one. Compared to those worlds, the world in which we live is a very dark dank place. A place of messy physicality. A place of concealment. If "G-d's portion is His people; Yaakov is the measure of His heritage," then why did G-d put us in this lowly world? Why didn't He put us in a higher, more spiritual world?

The Torah is the essence of the whole creation. If it were not for the Torah, the physical world and all its myriad laws would never have come into being. The Torah does not exist for the benefit of the incorporeal spiritual beings who inhabit the upper worlds. G-d wanted the Torah to be in this lowest of the worlds. Therefore, G-d also put us into this world so that we should involve ourselves with His Torah, day and night.

When a jewel is buried in the mud, there's no alternative but to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. If we search for riches where there are none, even if we conduct the search in climate-controlled, air-conditioned luxury, we won't even end up with a copper penny.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah: Ha'azinu

What's the longest word in the Torah?

There is only one ten letter word in the Torah, *uvmisharotecha* meaning 'and in your kneading troughs'. It's a description in the book of Shemot of the extent to which the plague of frogs affected the Egyptian nation, coming into all parts of their existence.

Now, what is the shortest word in the Torah? You might say 'come on... there are many two letter words: 'al', 'el', 'kol'. But actually there is one single letter word. It's in Devarim, chapter 32, verse 6. at the beginning of parshat Ha'azinu. Moshe, who is about to pass away, wants to give us a critically important message for our lives and he says: "Ha Lashem tigmalu zot" – "Is this how you're repaying Hashem your God?" "Am naval vlo chacham" – "a vile nation that is not wise".

Usually, we would say 'HaLashem', as one word, but if you have a look in the Torah – it is in bold and it is a separate word. And indeed the masoretic note in every Chumash indicates that this is a single lettered word. So why do we have this extraordinary phenomenon?

The theme is a most important one: how do we repay Hashem's kindness? He has created us. He has created this word. He gives us of his *chesed* continuously – as a nation, as individuals and as families and keeps us going against the odds. And if we behave in a vile manner then it is 'lo chacham' – we are simply not being clever. I find this to be very special because the Torah could have said 'you're being foolish' – but actually 'lo chacham' really means something important to us because as a people, we strive to be 'chachamim', we try our best to be wise. We study. We educate others. We utilise the information that we learn in

order to enhance our lives and our environment. And here Moshe is telling us we're not wise when we don't respect the existence of Hashem and we don't repay his kindness in an appropriate way.

Moshe Rabeinu wants us to know that there may be many paths to an appreciation of the existence and the greatness of the almighty. Of course we feel his presence emotionally, through great moments of spirituality, we feel his presence in our hearts. But ultimately, one must achieve an appreciation of the almighty through 'chachma' – 'wisdom'. Some of the greatest minds, some of the most brilliant people in this world, know about the truth of the concept of a creator and the existence of Hashem and the truth of every single word, indeed every letter, in our Torah.

Three times a day in the amidah prayer, we declare 'ata chonein ladam da'at' – 'thank you God for giving us knowledge'. It is with that knowledge that we must thank Hashem for what he has done, is doing and will always do for us. And all of this we learn from the shortest word in the Torah.

Shabbat Shalom

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

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Haazinu: The Purpose of Exile: Converts

Ben-Tzion Spitz

In an expanding universe, time is on the side of the outcast. Those who once inhabited the suburbs of human contempt find that without changing their address they eventually live in the metropolis. - Quentin Crisp

The famed Song of Haazinu, Moses' prophetic, poetic, final words to the nation of Israel, foretells, in cryptic verse, the future of the Jewish people. Among other events, it predicts both the rebellion of the Jewish people against God as well as our eventual exile from the land of Israel.

The Berdichever wonders as to why Haazinu is called a "song" (the Hebrew term "Shira" means a joyous song) if it contains such dire prophecies. What happiness, what joy can be found in our millennia-old exile? What is there to joyously sing about drifting, rootless, through the four corners of the planet for thousands of years? Of never having the safety of a homeland? Of being constantly persecuted? Of expulsions, inquisitions, ghettos, pogroms and a Holocaust?

The Berdichever states that there is not only a silver lining to our Exile, but that there is a deeper, fundamental reason why the nation of Israel needed to wander the globe all these centuries. It was to attract converts. Judaism is not a proselytizing religion. In fact, we discourage and make it challenging for non-Jews to undertake conversion to Judaism. Nonetheless, the Berdichever explains that the underlying purpose of our exile has been to gather converts. It is to collect holy sparks, divine souls from among all the nations of the world and bring them into the fold of our people.

That is why the prophecy of Haazinu that foretells our exile is called a "joyous song." The gathering and elevation of the divine sparks from among the nations of the world are part of our historic mission. It can only be accomplished through the long, globetrotting exile of our people.

May we complete the mission of gathering the sparks and come back home already.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach,

Dedication - To the Bar-Mitzvah of Uriel Williams. Mazal Tov!

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.

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Ha'azinu

פרשת האזינו תשפ

יערה כמטר לקהי

May my teaching drop like the rain. (32:2)

Moshe *Rabbeinu* asked that his teachings, the Torah, penetrate the nation like life-giving rain. The commentators offer reasons for the rain simile: the effect of rain is not immediately noticed; it takes time for the vegetation to sprout forth. Likewise, one who studies Torah does not immediately manifest the benefits that he has incurred. In time, however, it shows. Rain can only affect soil that has been plowed and seeded. Otherwise, it just turns the ground into mud. Likewise, for one who studies Torah, but does not believe in Hashem or possesses *middos ra'os*, negative character traits, Torah study is a deficiency. Torah catalyzes growth for that which the student already possesses within him. If he has a good heart, his fear of Hashem will grow positively. If he is evil, it will spur greater negativity in his soul.

The *Sifsei Tzaddikim* offers a novel exposition for the rain simile. Moshe asked that the Torah be rain-like, in the sense that rain causes whatever seeds are in the ground to emerge as vegetation or growth. If wheat is sowed, wheat will grow; if corn is planted, it will grow. If thorns, cactus, etc. is planted, they, too, will grow. Rain is the vehicle that causes the produce to emerge and “reveal” what is buried in the ground.

Torah has the property of causing what is embedded deep within the recesses of one’s heart to be revealed. Thus, for one whose spiritual intentions are sincere and positive, Torah will “grow” him, give him the opportunity to express his positive intentions, and see success in his learning and service to Hashem. If, however, he is nothing more than a wolf in sheep’s clothing, if he is a miserable thorn who seeks to use Torah as a medium for negativity, to find ways to manipulate Jewish law to his benefit, to demean the Torah way of life for his advantage and to support his bias, his ugly secret will be exposed.

הצור תמים פעלו כי כל דרכיו משפט קל אמונה ואין עול

The Rock! Perfect is His work, for all His paths are justice; a G-d of faith without iniquity. (32:4)

Rashi puts this *pasuk* in its most simple and lucid perspective: Hashem’s judgment is perfect, exact and fair. He rewards the righteous, regardless of how long it might take for this reward to be fulfilled. Likewise, even the wicked receive their reward for whatever good they performed. Furthermore, the term perfect means “perfect.” It is a reference to the totality of Hashem’s work, the combination of good fortune and failure, happiness and sadness, joy and tragedy: a harmonious whole. Regrettably, we -- of limited intelligence and understanding -- are incapable of putting all of the pieces of the puzzle we call “life” together. A believer lives by this credo: Hashem’s work is perfect. It is our comprehension that is imperfect.

A *chassid* asked the *Belzer Rebbe* (*Rav Aharon*), *zl*, concerning his family and what had taken place in Belz before he escaped. (The *Belzer Rebbe* was miraculously saved from the horrors of the Holocaust.) The *Rebbe* replied, “I refuse to talk about that period of my life, because it might appear as if I am complaining against Hashem. We will leave that part of my life unsaid.” The *Rebbe* experienced the tragic loss of his entire family (forty souls); yet, he refused to speak about it, so that his words would not be misconstrued as a remonstrance of Hashem.

A Holocaust survivor who had lost his family in the camps emigrated to Haifa after the war. He found work as a *shamash*, sexton, in a *shul*. He had suffered greatly and was getting on in years, yet he wanted to build a Jewish home. He married, and, with Hashem’s blessing, the couple had a son. He was a special child: bright, handsome, kind – everything a parent could hope for. One day, the boy, twelve years old, crossed the street and was struck by a car whose driver had lost control of the vehicle. The boy was killed instantly. The *Rav* of the *shul* (who was relating the story) did not know how he could confront this man during the *shivah* visit. This person had lost everything -- not once, but twice. (Indeed, he had a loving partner in life, but she, too, had experienced what he had.) The *Rav* climbed the stairs to their apartment very slowly, actually stalling the confrontation that he knew would be difficult. He walked into the room to see the bereaved couple (both of them beyond middle-age) sitting on the floor reciting *Tehillim*! The father looked up from his *Tehillim* when he noticed the *Rav* sit down

next to him, and said, “If the *Ribono Shel Olam* thinks that He will succeed in provoking me to express anger, He is mistaken! Even for this which He did to me, I will not complain!”

The *Rav* left the *shivah* house in great emotion: *Yisrael kedoshim heim*; the Jewish people are holy! This was a simple man, neither a Torah scholar, nor a brilliant thinker. Just a simple, good, G-d-fearing Jew who believed with all of his heart in Hashem: *Mi k’Amcha Yisrael*; “Who is like Your nation, Hashem!”

Everyone receives his due: good/bad, at some time everyone will receive his reward or punishment. It can come at the strangest times or under the most unusual and unexpected circumstances. The following story has made the rounds, publicized by Rabbi Berel Wein, to whom it was related by the participant. It is an incredible, inspiring and compelling story which is certainly worth repeating. One *Shabbos* afternoon, as Rabbi Wein walked home from his *shul* in Yerushalayim, he met a man who wore the garb, talked the talk, but had features that were neither Jewish nor Israeli. He confided to Rabbi Wein that he was a *ger*, having converted to Judaism many years earlier. He also added that his gentile pedigree was quite murky: his father had been a Nazi.

“I was in my early twenties when I discovered my father’s ignominious work during the Holocaust. I became enraged with him. I was devastated to know that, as an SS man, my father had participated in many massacres of Jews. I immediately fled my home, never to return. I severed my ties with my family, as I renounced everything that had heretofore been dear to me.

“I wanted to know more about the Jewish people: why Hitler hated them so much? What could these people have done to make them the target of the greatest hatred in history? Where does one go to learn about Jews? *Eretz Yisrael*. I came here and fell in love with the country and the people. I decided to continue my graduate studies in microbiology at Hebrew University. As my stay went beyond visit status, I decided that I wanted to know more about the Jewish religion. I started studying the texts and attending classes whenever available. I converted to Judaism. Shortly thereafter, I met a wonderful woman, also a German convert, and we married. Hashem blessed us with three wonderful sons, who went through the system. All received a solid *yeshiva* education in mainstream schools; all are fine, upstanding *bonei* Torah. They do have blond hair and blue eyes, but, otherwise, they dress and act the part of Torah Jews. No one would ever guess (or have reason to ask about) their real genetic heritage.

“Many years passed, and my resolve to maintain my severed relationship with my family only became stronger. I was a Jew with a Jewish family. I would have nothing to do with my family of origin or their horrible legacy of hatred and murder of innocent people. One day, I was shocked to find a letter from my father in my mailbox, informing me that he was extremely ill and dying. He begged me to come to Germany, so that he could see his grandchildren before he left this world. I consulted with a prominent *Rav* in Yerushalayim who instructed me to return to Germany with my sons in order to fulfill my father’s dying wish.

“It was not a simple meeting. My father’s physical appearance had changed greatly due to age and illness. He was a fraction of the man I had once known. The atmosphere in the room was tense and pensive. Here was a man who had, years earlier, murdered Jewish children, hugging and kissing *yeshiva* boys who happened to be his grandsons. He cried bitterly, amid spasms of coughing. I had no doubt that his end was near. He said that he wanted to talk, to tell me a story. I knew that whatever he would say would be the truth. He was too close to death. ‘I think that you will appreciate what I have to say,’ he said.

“One day during the war on the eastern front, my comrades and I were rounding up all of the Jewish residents and throwing them into trucks to be delivered to the gas chambers. We wanted to be sure that we had found every Jew, so we made another tour of the village and searched everywhere.

“It was during this last inspection that I saw them: three sets of round, black eyes peering up at me from beneath one of the trucks. Their eyes locked with mine, as I was about to call my comrades and

inform them that I had discovered three more Jewish children hiding from us. But I could not do it. Something prevented me from passing the death sentence on these children. It was their eyes, staring straight into mine, pleading with me to allow them to live. For the first and only time in my career as a Nazi did I feel a touch of compassion. I was somehow moved. I walked away and shouted to the others, "There's no one left. We are through here. Let's go!"

"I will never forget those children," my father said. "They were three little Jewish boys, innocent children with sweet faces. Just like yours."

"You know," my father mused, his clouding, death-filled eyes suddenly perking up, "I am certain that, had there been four boys hiding in there beneath the truck that day, I would have had four grandchildren – not three!"

This *goy*, this Nazi, understood the message of the *pasuk*. No act goes unrequited. It might take time; we may never understand, but one thing is for sure: everyone receives his due.

וישמן ישרון ויבעט שמנת עבית כשית

But Yeshurun grew fat and kicked. You are waxen fat, grown thick and covered with fatness. (32:15)

Sforno offers a compelling interpretation of this *pasuk*. *Yeshurun* is a reference to the *baalei iyun*, scholars and philosophers who became fat and gross after having turned to material excess and pleasures. They grew thick, incapable of comprehending the Torah's subtle verities. When those who are (supposedly) intelligent, refined leaders of the people set a bad example, the masses will most certainly follow their lead.

These scholars have not, *chas v'shalom*, Heaven forbid, rejected Hashem, but their wisdom is adulterated by their pursuit of physical pleasures and material riches. They pay respect primarily to those who have achieved mundane success. It is such scholars who are dangerous, because of their impact on the simple folk who still look up to them and follow their lead. Indeed, the masses usually outdo their leaders, as they regress further by forgetting G-d and ending up treating all that is sacred and meaningful with contempt.

First and foremost, *Sforno* teaches us that materialism and physicality are incongruent to success in Torah. This world and the World-to-Come contravene one another, to the point that one who is focused on Torah cannot indulge (as in luxuriate/bask) in the material/physical pleasures of this world. (This does not preclude enjoyment, but excess.) This does create a problem, since, for the most part, we do live in a world, a culture, a society in which *gashmiyus*, materialism and physicality play a prominent role. How does the contemporary Torah family/individual balance the two worlds: the one in which he lives; and the one on which he should be focused?

Horav Matsiyahu Solomon, Shlita, applies the well-known words of the *Mesillas Yesharim* (*Perek* 1), "The pleasures of this world exist only to aid and assist a person, so that through the physical satisfaction that he experiences, he will have the contentment and peace of mind to devote himself /his heart to *avodah*, service of the Almighty." In other words, we must all ask ourselves: Is our partiality to this world and its materialistic /physical lures helping us to grow in spirituality, or is it a hindrance? Are we now more calm, greater at ease; or are we slowly moving away from our spiritual goals?

Horav Chaim Kamil, zl, finds in *Sforno's* words, support for *Horav Yisrael Salanter's* maxim: "When the Torah scholar in Kovno studies diligently, he causes the professor in Berlin not to turn his back on Judaism." This is what *Sforno* teaches us. The scholar who is delinquent in learning who gravitates toward worldly pleasures will have a following among the *hamon am*, masses, who look up to their Torah elite for guidance and inspiration. When they see moral and spiritual hypocrisy, can they really be blamed for vying with and following their pattern of deceit?

Is a little bit of excess that bad? If one were to indulge in physical pleasure purely for the fun of it with no other purpose whatsoever, would it damage him so much? Obviously, worldly possessions are not poison, or else they could not be used as a medium

"to aid and assist" one's *avodas ha'kodesh*, holy endeavor. At first, I would suggest that poison is relative. One person's medicine is another person's poison. Therefore, pleasure that catalyzes satisfaction which eases one's mind so that he can study and serve Hashem better, is not poisonous. On the contrary, it is therapeutic. This same "therapy," when administered to one who is spiritually healthy and doing well, can be dangerous.

I came across an exegesis from *Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita*, that is illuminating. He comments on the *pasuk*, *Ki dor tahapuchos heimah*, "They are a generation of reversals" (ibid 32:20). (They reverse Hashem's mood from benevolence to anger.) *Klal Yisrael* is different in nature from the nations of the world. They do not have the (natural) option of being a *beinoni*, intermediate. We are a nation of extremes. When we are living (spiritually, morally) well, we rise up to the top. We have no limit to what we are capable of achieving. On the other hand, when we begin to fall, if we do not immediately stop the fall, we freefall to the nadir of depravity.

Our *tzaddikim*, righteous, have exemplified themselves in spiritual achievement, such that the average person has no idea or comprehension thereof. Sadly, those who have deviated and regressed have fallen to the depths of perversion and notoriety. Therefore, one who is on the pedestal of spiritual achievement, who is an extraordinary Torah scholar, yet deviates slightly to partake, to enjoy, to "live the life," must realize that we are a nation of extremes. We have no such concept as a "little bit of fun" or "I just want to try it out to see how the other half lives." It might just happen that during that moment of indulgence, one of those who reveres and looks up to him might be watching. The repercussions can be disastrous, because the student will neither understand nor know how to process what he is observing.

כי דור תהפכת המה בנים לא אמן במ

For they are a generation of reversals, children whose upbringing is not in them. (32:20)

Hashem raised them to be good, but they spurned His upbringing, so that it is not reflected in their demeanor. Alternatively, *eimun* is connected to *emunah*, faith. At *Har Sinai*, the people of *Klal Yisrael* pledged continued faith in Hashem, a pledge which they soon broke by making the Golden Calf. The *Sifri* adds: "Do not read this as *lo eimun bam*, but rather, *lo amen bam*; 'They refused to say *amen*.'" Responding to a blessing is an extraordinary *segulah*, remedy (an action that can lead to a change in one's fortune or destiny), which has been noted and proven. The following story underscores this idea.

The tragic news spread like wildfire through the Klausenberg *Chassidic* community in Union City, New Jersey. A young father, whose name was Aharon, had lost his life in a car accident. It was 1979. The entire community plunged into mourning. The pain was also felt in the *Klausenberger Rebbe's* home, since Aharon was very close to the *Rebbe* and his family. Before the dust could settle on this tragedy, more terrible news reached the quiet, insular community. Another precious young husband and father, *Reb Moshe Nechemiah*, had sustained a heart attack and returned his soul to his Maker.

At the end of the *shivah*, seven-day mourning period for these two young men, the members of the community decided that they had to implement some form of change. It happened to be that day was the day when the *Rebbe* would lecture to the men. It was a perfect time to hear from this saintly Jew, who had himself sustained much tragedy in his life, what the community should do, what area of deficiency they should correct as a *z'chus*, merit, for the departed and as a *segulah* for themselves to have the *Middas Ha'Din*, Attribute of Strict Justice, lifted from their community.

The *Rebbe* began the *shiur* by citing our opening *pasuk*, *banim lo eimun bam*. He then quoted the *Sifri/Yalkut* that attributes the sin to an indifference toward answering *Amen* after *brachos*, blessings. The *Rebbe* looked at the assembled, staring deeply into their faces, and a hush fell over the congregation, as he declared: "*Amen* is the *roshei teivos*, acronym (head of the words) of Aharon, Moshe, Nechemiah! Heaven is very demanding of us for not adhering properly to answering *Amen*. These two young men were taken from us as a result of our

dereliction in answering *Amen*. If we begin to answer *Amen* with the proper *kavanah*, intention (direction of the heart), we will merit the lifting of the *g'zar din*, decree, from upon us."

An American *avreich*, young man, who was studying in *kollel* turned to *Rav Avraham Kessler* (who was very close to *Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman*, *zl*) and asked that he speak with the *Rosh Yeshivah* concerning the many difficult challenges with which he was presently beset. When the young man sent his list of troubles, it was evident why he was so depressed. He had been married a number of years to a wonderful woman, but they had yet to be blessed with children. He was overwhelmed with debt. He was so deep in the hole that he had no hope, no possible way to extricate himself from it. Last, he had just been diagnosed with the dreaded disease. He did not know how he could possibly go on. Could he obtain a blessing, advice – something – anything?

Rav Kessler approached *Rav Shteinman* one morning after the early *Shacharis* in his apartment and presented the young *avreich's* sad story. The *Rosh Yeshivah* replied with a *midrash* that relates a meaningful *mashal*, analogy. There was a man who was proficient on the harp. His music was soothing and transformative. When a person who was steeped in melancholy heard him play, he would immediately emerge from his morose mood. The king had once been depressed, and his advisors suggested that they dispatch someone to bring the harpist to the palace. He came; he played; the king's mood was transformed.

Likewise is our relationship with Hashem (continues the *Midrash*). Hashem "enjoys" the *niggun*, song/tune/lyrics of *Amen, Yehei Shmei rabba mevarach*. Thus, even if a condemnation arises against His People, their singing *Amen, Yehei Shmei rabba mevarach*, causes great pleasure to Hashem so that He rescinds the decree.

Rav Shteinman concluded with a message for the *avreich*: "Tell the young man that despite his miscomprehension of these matters, *Chazal* teach that Hashem enjoys this 'song.' This recital has within its power to negate and atone for many Heavenly indictments."

Rav Kessler relayed the message, which the young man followed religiously. He not only answered *Amen, Yehei Shmei rabba* in his *shul*, he even went to other *minyanim* (prayer services) in order to have the opportunity to do more. And... Hashem listened and responded positively. As it came from nowhere, it disappeared. When the young man returned to the doctor who had originally diagnosed him to begin treatment, lo and behold, the scans showed that he was clear; there had been no growth. His economic challenge did not come to an end, but it was greatly alleviated when one of the *shul* members whom he "visited" daily (to answer *Amen, Yehei Shmei rabba*) offered him a sizable loan, sufficient to clear up his debt, without placing a time limit for repayment. Whenever he would come into money would be fine. Last, he and his wife were blessed with a family. All of this in the *z'chus* of answering *Amen, Yehei Shmei rabba*. As a post script, the *avreich* did not stop going from *shul* to *shul* to answer, *Amen, Yehei Shmei rabba*. Will this *segulah* work for everyone? There is only one way to find out.

Va'ani Tefillah

**שמע קולינו ד' אלקינו - Shema koleinu Hashem Elokeinu
Hear our voices, Hashem, our G-d.**

The *Shulchan Orach* (*Orach Chaim* 119:1) rules that one may insert his personal petition for a blessing, similar to the theme of the blessing he is reciting. In other words, when he recites *Bircas Refaeinu*, the blessing for healing the sick, one may add the name of someone who is in need of a cure for his illness. In the ninth blessing, which addresses prosperity, one may include his personal request for a livelihood. The sixteenth blessing, *Shema Koleinu*, is a generic type of blessing, in which we ask Hashem to hear our voices without stating specifics. Therefore, in this blessing one may ask for anything that he desires. (Obviously, one is making a meaningful request.) The *Mishnah Berurah* adds that this blessing is an appropriate time to include one's confession of his outstanding sins, especially if he has committed a specific transgression that requires a special *Vidui*, confession. One should ask that his income be sufficient and that he earn it appropriately and honorably, without pain and trouble. Last, the *Yaaros Devash* adds that

this is a good place for one to ask Hashem for whatever he needs, however trivial or inconsequential it may be. We must remember that nothing is too petty to bring to the table. Hashem is our Heavenly Father. A father puts up with a lot. As long as one prays with sincerity, and as long as what he requests is reasonable, then, indeed, this is a propitious time and place to make his request.

זכר נשמת
רחל לאה בת ר' נח ע"ה
פריידא בת ר' נח ע"ה
שרה אסתר בת ר' נח ע"ה
נספו במחנות ההסגר בשנות הזעם
ג' תשרי תש"ג

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Man is Not Alone

Jonathan Rosenblum Mishpacha Magazine

We must first understand what is wrong about Man being alone

Last week, we discussed the judgment of Rosh Hashanah in terms of the extent to which each of us has realized his or her individuality. Have we employed our *daas* to give definition to ourselves and our unique mission in life?

That understanding, brought down in the name of *Rav Moshe Shapiro ztz"l*, is closely tied to the fact that Adam Harishon was created *yechidi*, singular, and constituted an *olam malei* at the moment of his creation. He alone justified the creation of the world.

But elsewhere, *Rav Moshe* pointed out that this understanding of why Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment only works according to *Rabi Eliezer*, who says that the world was created in *Tishrei*, in which case the creation of Man was on Rosh Hashanah.

According to *Rabi Yehoshua*, however, who states that the world was created in *Nissan* (and whose opinion we follow, at least with respect to establishing the seasonal calendar), what is the intrinsic connection between Rosh Hashanah and judgment? *Rabbeinu Nissim* and the *Ramban* ask this question, and they answer that Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment because it is the beginning of the month in which *Yom Kippur* falls, and thus encapsulates the entire month. That answer, however, is on its face, difficult to understand.

Rav Moshe posed a second difficulty to the entire concept of each of us passing before Hashem alone on Rosh Hashanah: The only aspect of the Creation that the Torah describes as "lo tov — not good" is Adam Harishon's creation as a solitary individual: "It is not good for man to be alone" (*Bereishis* 2:18). Why should the judgment on Rosh Hashanah emphasize that state of "not good?"

To Answer These Questions, we must first understand what is wrong about Man being alone. *Rashi* explains, "So that it should not be said that there are two deities — the Holy One Blessed be He in the Upper Spheres without a partner and this one in the lower spheres without a partner." Left to himself, man will naturally proclaim, "There is none besides me." That is the essence of all *avodah zarah*.

Yet the purpose of Creation is for Man to recognize his own lack of completion and his need for connection to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. The joining of man and woman in marriage is, at some level, a metaphor for the proper relationship of Hashem and mankind. Just as the husband provides for his wife, who is the recipient, so too Hashem is our provider and we are His recipients.

Chazal say that had *Bnei Yisrael* not accepted the Torah, the world would have returned to its original *tohu va'vohu*. The acceptance of the Torah constitutes the ultimate recognition of our dependence on *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, and that we exist only insofar as we connect to His Necessary Existence. Without that recognition, the world cannot continue.

On *Yom Kippur*, *Moshe Rabbeinu's* pleas on behalf of the Jewish People were accepted, and he was given the Second *Luchos*. But until that moment, the Jewish people, and indeed the entire world, were under a decree of destruction, for the breaking of the First *Luchos* essentially constituted a failure to accept the Torah.

The receipt of the Torah on Yom Kippur is explicitly referred to in Shir Hashirim (3:11) as the "wedding day" of Hashem and the Jewish people. On that day, the Jewish people recognized their dependence on Hashem as their Provider and the Torah as the necessary means of connection to Him.

The giving of the Torah is associated with judgment and justice: "From the Heavens, You sounded justice; the earth was fearful and became tranquil" (Tehillim 76:9). Justice implies that things are as they must be. Our acceptance of Torah means that we recognize Torah not just as something positive, but as something absolutely necessary, without which neither we nor the world can exist.

The judgment on Rosh Hashanah precedes the giving of the Torah on Yom Kippur; it is a judgment on us as acceptors of the Torah, ones who recognize that Torah connects us to True Existence and is therefore necessary.

For that judgment to take place, we must first pass before Hashem k'vnei maron, as individuals. The question addressed to us applies specifically to us in our individual state: Do you recognize that being alone is "lo tov — not good?"

Our status as an "olam malei," as an entire world unto ourselves, provides us with the capacity to uplift Hashem and to crown Him as King. Only one who has the power to rebel — a power inherent in our bechirah — possesses the power to truly proclaim Hashem as Melech.

The judgment upon us, which is heralded by the shofar, uplifts us more than any kindness showered on us could possibly do. For that judgment gives us the opportunity to recognize that our existence depends on attaching ourselves to a higher reality. Only then do we cease to be alone in a state of "not good" and worthy of praying, "And give honor, Hashem, to Your people, praise to those Who fear You, and verbal expression to those who await You."

לע"נ

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