

[Rosh Hashana to follow in separate issue]

## NITZAVIM

### Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

This week's reading in the Torah describes the eternal binding covenant between God and the Jewish people. This covenant has played itself out over thousands of years of world history and remains valid and operative today as it did on the day that Moshe presented it to the Jewish people at the end of his life. The covenant is all-encompassing and applies to all who were members of the Jewish people. It states specifically that even the lowest and least educated classes of the Jewish people – those who chop the word and draw the water – are as important and included in the terms of the covenant as are the wisest and most intellectually gifted of the Jewish people.

This is a remarkable statement for human society, which, since its inception has always divided itself into classes according to talents, education, and financial status. These differences also existed within Jewish society, but the covenant is not affected by these societal norms and differences that every generation of Jewish people exhibited. The Torah does not present for us a utopian vision of a classless society, where equality exists amongst all members of a certain nation or group. Such an idea flies in the face of human nature and behavior. The Torah does inform us though, that there is an over arching covenant that binds all Jews, no matter their station in life and their experiences, and it is this covenant that is the basis of the relationship between the God of Israel and the people of Israel.

The Torah recognizes that life is not always fair to everyone. The distribution of talent, opportunities and wealth has always been unequal, and no economic theory or legislative program will ever change that reality. The Torah does not countenance playing the victim card as an excuse for one's failures and shortcomings. The prophet Jeremiah stated this succinctly when he said, "Why should a human being complain, is it not sufficient that it is yet alive?"

Judaism measures people by their capacity to realize their potential. That is why the rabbis taught us that the righteous people are judged as finely as the breadth of a hair. The more righteous one is, the greater is the potential for performing acts of goodness. In effect, the Torah is teaching us that we are our own judges, each according to his/her abilities and opportunities. The question that will be asked of us is why we were not what we could have been, irrespective of the achievements and greatness we have achieved or compared to that of other human beings.

It is ironic that in world history the Jewish people could certainly be characterized as the victim and would be justified for not being a contributory force in the advancement of world civilization. But, even the most cursory view of world history shows that it was the Jewish people, more than anyone else, who drove forward the forces of civilization for the betterment of the human condition, physically and certainly spiritually.

Shabbat shalom  
Rabbi Berel Wein

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## Not Beyond the Sea (Nitzavim 5779)

### Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

When I was a student at university in the late 1960s – the era of student protests, psychedelic drugs, and the Beatles meditating with the

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi – a story went the rounds. An American Jewish woman in her sixties travelled to north India to see a celebrated guru. There were huge crowds waiting to see the holy man, but she pushed through, saying that she needed to see him urgently. Eventually, after weaving through the swaying crowds, she entered the tent and stood in the presence of the master himself. What she said that day has entered the realm of legend. She said, "Marvin, listen to your mother. Enough already. Come home."

Starting in the sixties Jews made their way into many religions and cultures with one notable exception: their own. Yet Judaism has historically had its mystics and meditators, its poets and philosophers, its holy men and women, its visionaries and prophets. It has often seemed as if the longing we have for spiritual enlightenment is in direct proportion to its distance, its foreignness, its unfamiliarity. We prefer the far to the near.

Moses already foresaw this possibility: Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Deut. 30:11–14)

Moses sensed prophetically that in the future Jews would say that to find inspiration we have to ascend to heaven or cross the sea. It is anywhere but here. So it was for much of Israel's history during the First and Second Temple periods. First came the era in which the people were tempted by the gods of the people around them: the Canaanite Baal, the Moabite Chemosh, or Marduk and Astarte in Babylon. Later, in Second Temple times, they were attracted to Hellenism in its Greek or Roman forms. It is a strange phenomenon, best expressed in the memorable line of Groucho Marx: "I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." Jews have long had a tendency to fall in love with people who do not love them and pursue almost any spiritual path so long as it is not their own. But it is very debilitating.

When great minds leave Judaism, Judaism loses great minds. When those in search of spirituality go elsewhere, Jewish spirituality suffers. And this tends to happen in precisely the paradoxical way that Moses describes several times in Deuteronomy. It occurs in ages of affluence, not poverty, in eras of freedom, not slavery. When we seem to have little to thank God for, we thank God. When we have much to be grateful for, we forget.

The eras in which Jews worshipped idols or became Hellenised were Temple times when Jews lived in their land, enjoying either sovereignty or autonomy. The age in which, in Europe, they abandoned Judaism was the period of Emancipation, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, when for the first time they enjoyed civil rights.

The surrounding culture in most of these cases was hostile to Jews and Judaism. Yet Jews often preferred to adopt the culture that rejected them rather than embrace the one that was theirs by birth and inheritance, where they had the chance of feeling at home. The results were often tragic.

Becoming Baal worshippers did not lead to Israelites being welcomed by the Canaanites. Becoming Hellenised did not endear Jews to either the Greeks or the Romans. Abandoning Judaism in the nineteenth century did not end antisemitism; it inflamed it. Hence the power of Moses' insistence: to find truth, beauty, and spirituality, you do not have

to go elsewhere. “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”

The result was that Jews enriched other cultures more than their own. Part of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony is a Catholic mass. Irving Berlin, son of a chazzan, wrote “White Christmas.” Felix Mendelssohn, grandson of one of the first “enlightened” Jews, Moses Mendelssohn, composed church music and rehabilitated Bach’s long-neglected St Matthew Passion. Simone Weil, one of the deepest Christian thinkers of the twentieth century – described by Albert Camus as “the only great spirit of our times” – was born to Jewish parents. So was Edith Stein, celebrated by the Catholic Church as a saint and martyr, but murdered in Auschwitz because to the Nazis she was a Jew. And so on.

Was it the failure of Europe to accept the Jewishness of Jews and Judaism? Was it Judaism’s failure to confront the challenge? The phenomenon is so complex it defies any simple explanation. But in the process, we lost great art, great intellect, great spirits and minds.

To some extent the situation has changed both in Israel and in the Diaspora. There has been much new Jewish music and a revival of Jewish mysticism. There have been important Jewish writers and thinkers. But we still spiritually underachieve. The deepest roots of spirituality come from within: from within a culture, a tradition, a sensibility. They come from the syntax and semantics of the native language of the soul: “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”

The beauty of Jewish spirituality is precisely that in Judaism God is close. You do not need to climb a mountain or enter an ashram to find the Divine Presence. It is there around the table at a Shabbat meal, in the light of the candles and the simple holiness of the Kiddush wine and the challot, in the praise of the Eishet Chayil and the blessing of children, in the peace of mind that comes when you leave the world to look after itself for a day while you celebrate the good things that come not from working but resting, not from buying but enjoying – the gifts you have had all along but did not have time to appreciate.

In Judaism, God is close. He is there in the poetry of the psalms, the greatest literature of the soul ever written. He is there listening in to our debates as we study a page of the Talmud or offer new interpretations of ancient texts. He is there in the joy of the festivals, the tears of Tisha B’Av, the echoes of the shofar of Rosh Hashanah, and the contrition of Yom Kippur. He is there in the very air of the land of Israel and the stones of Jerusalem, where the oldest of the old and the newest of the new mingle together like close friends.

God is near. That is the overwhelming feeling I get from a lifetime of engaging with the faith of our ancestors. Judaism needed no cathedrals, no monasteries, no abstruse theologies, no metaphysical ingenuities – beautiful though all these are – because for us God is the God of everyone and everywhere, who has time for each of us, and who meets us where we are, if we are willing to open our soul to Him.

I am a Rabbi. For many years I was a Chief Rabbi. But in the end I think it was we, the Rabbis, who did not do enough to help people open their doors, their minds, and their feelings to the Presence-beyond-the-universe-who-created-us-in-love that our ancestors knew so well and loved so much. We were afraid – of the intellectual challenges of an aggressively secular culture, of the social challenges of being in yet not entirely of the world, of the emotional challenge of finding Jews or Judaism or the State of Israel criticised and condemned. So we retreated behind a high wall, thinking that made us safe. High walls never make you safe; they only make you fearful. What makes you safe is confronting the challenges without fear and inspiring others to do likewise.

What Moses meant in those extraordinary words, “It is not in heaven...nor is it beyond the sea,” was: Kinderlach, your parents trembled when they heard the voice of God at Sinai. They were overwhelmed. They said: If we hear any more we will die. So God found ways in which you could meet Him without being overwhelmed. Yes, He is creator, sovereign, supreme power, first cause, mover of the planets and the stars. But He is also parent, partner, lover, friend. He is Shechinah, from shachen, meaning, the neighbour next door.

So thank Him every morning for the gift of life. Say the Shema twice daily for the gift of love. Join your voice to others in prayer so that His spirit may flow through you, giving you the strength and courage to change the world.

When you cannot see Him, it is because you are looking in the wrong direction. When He seems absent, He is there just behind you, but you have to turn to meet Him. Do not treat Him like a stranger. He loves you. He believes in you. He wants your success. To find Him you do not have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. His is the voice you hear in the silence of the soul. His is the light you see when you open your eyes to wonder. His is the hand you touch in the pit of despair. His is the breath that gives you life.

Shabbat Shalom

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### **Shabbat Shalom: Nitzavim (Deuteronomy 29:9-30:20)** **By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

Efrat, Israel – “You are all standing before God your Lord – the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your bailiffs, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, even the hewer of your wood, and the drawer of your water. [The purpose is that] you should enter into a covenant with God, and into His oath, that He is making with you today.” (Deuteronomy 29:9–11)

We read a bit further on, in the book of Joshua (8:33–34), “And all of Israel and its elders, its heads of tribes and its judges... Priests and Levites, half facing Mount Gerizim and half facing Mount Eival... Joshua read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse.” Why must Moses make a covenant with the nations “today,” in the plains of the Moab, so similar to the Covenant which will soon be made with Joshua on Mt. Grizim and Mt. Eival?

The Midrash Tanhuma, which is cited by Rashi and which opened our last commentary, provides an important insight by teaching us that what necessitated the Third Covenant is the sin of the Golden Calf. It might have been thought that once the Israelites formed and worshipped a golden calf – only forty days after they had ratified the covenant at Sinai and on the very watch of Moses – their evil deed of treachery and faithlessness, idolatry and adultery, abrogated the covenant forever. The Almighty therefore enters into a third covenant during Moses’ lifetime as an affirmation of the truth that whereas a contract can be broken, a covenant is irrevocable; despite the backsliding of Israel, their covenant with their God who is always ready to accept their repentance remains eternally validated. “You have greatly angered the Almighty, but nevertheless you have not been destroyed, and behold you are standing here today.” (See “Two Destructions and Two Redemptions.”)

I would suggest another significance to this third covenant, and by so doing explain why and how the Israelites could have stooped to idolatry so soon after the glory of the revelation. In addition, we shall interpret the unique language of the Third Covenant itself.

What initially strikes us about the Third Covenant – and the manner in which it clearly differs from its predecessors – is its democratic element. Every single Israelite is summoned and included, from the chairman of

the board to the lowly water carrier: “the heads of your tribes... your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, even the hewer of your wood, and the drawer of your water” (Deut. 29:9–10).

In terms of the ancient world, what could possibly be more allinclusive and democratic?

This town-hall meeting is in sharp contrast to the Sinai covenant, as recorded in Parashat Mishpatim: “All of you must bow down at a distance. Only Moses shall then approach God. The others may not come close, and the people may not go up with him” (Ex. 24:1–2). The extraordinary demonstration of God’s transcendent presence upon Mount Sinai necessitated warnings and boundaries. The Revelation was clearly aimed for the entire nation, but God spoke to Moses in a special and unique way; the rest of the nation was warned to keep its distance from the frenzied fire of faith, which has the capacity to consume as well as to construct. Hence it was Moses who received the bulk of the Revelation, and he served as the intermediary to convey the divine will to the nation (Deut. 5:4, 20–25).

On this basis, we can readily understand why and how the Israelites could succumb to idolatry so soon after the Revelation; since the Revelation revolved so centrally about Moses, when Moses failed to descend from the mountain at the expected time, the people felt bereft and orphaned. After all, the nation related to Moses more than to God – and in their frightened and desperate moment, due to the absence of Moses, they turned to the familiar Egyptian idols.

Enter the covenant in our portion of Nitzavim, the covenant that stresses the truth that God has a unique relationship with every single Israelite – Jew and stranger, man and woman, rich and poor, elders and children, wood-choppers and tribal chiefs – and not only with Moses or the elite class of scholars and pietists. The Third Covenant attempts to correct the previous misimpression that God was primarily concerned with the religious elite; God entered into a covenant with every single Jew!

Furthermore, unlike the Sinai Covenant, the present covenant takes into account not only the totality of all Jews, an across-the-board horizontal gathering, but it’s also a vertical covenant, extending both backwards and forwards, spanning even past and future generations: “Not with you alone do I make this covenant.... But with those who stand here this day before the Lord our God...as well as with those who are not here with us this day” (Deut. 29:13–14). The Third Covenant includes all of historic Israel, Knesset Yisrael entire, past, present, and future; it emphasizes the all-inclusive historical and eternal aspect of the relationship between God and Israel.

Years before the United Nations Partition Plan of November 29, 1947, an earlier plan was offered which would have given the aspiring state a very meager parcel of land. David Ben Gurion, the chairman of the Histadrut HaTzionit, was unsure as to whether or not to accept the offer. He greatly respected Yitzhak Tabenkin, a leading Labor Zionist of that period, and so he uncharacteristically agreed to abide by Tabenkin’s decision. Tabenkin asked for another twenty-four hours, insisting that he must first seek counsel with two individuals. The next day, he advised Ben Gurion to reject the plan. “I accept your decision,” said the modern-day Lion of Judah, “but just tell me by whom you were advised?” “I had to ask two very important individuals,” said Tabenkin, “my grandfather and my grandson; I took counsel with my grandfather who died ten years ago, and with my grandson who is not yet born.” Yitzhak Tabenkin fully understood the significance of the Covenant of Arvot Moab, the Third Covenant.  
Shabbat Shalom!

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#### **Rav Shlomo Aviner Shlit"ta**

Ha-Rav answers hundreds of text message questions a day. Here's a sample:

#### **Cup with Halachah**

Q: Does a disposable cup which says "Please recite She-Ha-Kol Neyihe Bidvaro with proper intention" require being placed in the Geniza?

A: Yes, even though it is disposable,

#### **Premature Baby**

Q: If a baby is born prematurely, did he learn less Torah with the angel in his mother's womb?

A: No. The Torah is absorbed within the special nature of a Jew's soul.

#### **Festive Meal for Hatafat Dam Brit**

Q: If a baby if born circumcised and there is a Hatafat Dam Brit, is there still a festive meal? Tachanun?

A: There is an obligation to have a festive meal. Kaf Ha-Chaim (131:71). Tachanun is not recited.

#### **Mesader Kiddushin**

Q: Is there a spiritual significance to the Mesader Kiddushim at a wedding?

A: No (Ha-Rav Chaim Kaniensky said that he is particular to serve as a Sandek at a Brit Milah since it is a Mitzvah, which is not the case with a Mesader Kiddushin).

#### **Bothersome Person**

Q: How is it possible to love a bothersome person?

A: 1. See the good in him. 2. Regarding this bad character traits: do not judge a person until you walk in his shoes.

#### **Angel who Teaches Torah to Non-Jews**

Q: Does the angel who teaches Torah also teach it to non-Jews?

A: He only teaches to Jews.. "The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov" (Devarim 33:4). But he teaches non-Jews the Seven Mitzvot of the Sons of Noach which are incumbent upon non-Jews.

#### **Youth During Terror Attacks**

Q: What is the role of the youth during periods of terror attacks?

A: To add strength and courage to the Nation.

#### **Beginning of Redemption and Expulsions**

Q: How is it possible to say that it is Atchalta De-Geulah - the beginning of the Redemption - when Jews are being expelled from their houses?

A: 1. It is not the Beginning of the Redemption, but rather the Redemption itself, but not the full Redemption. 2. It is not written in any place that during the Beginning of the Redemption or during the Redemption, Jews will not be expelled from their houses. It is only written regarding the full Redemption. 3. Our Sages define the Beginning of the Redemption as war (Megillah 17b), i.e. wars to protect the Nation of Israel – Baruch Hashem.

#### **Foxes on the Temple Mount**

Q: It has been reported that foxes were seen on the Temple Mount. What does it mean? Is it connected to the prophecy "Foxes will go in it [the Holy of Holies]" (Eicha 5:18)?

A: It does not mean anything.

#### **Immodest Pictures from the Holocaust**

Q: We visited Yad Vashem and an ethical question arose. Is it permissible to display pictures of people without clothing during the Holocaust to show the evil and cruelty of the Nazis?

A: It is certainly forbidden. It is immodest and debasing. If it was your mother, would be agree to have such a picture of her on display?!

#### **Abusive Mother**

Q: I see a neighbor abusing her child all the time, and punishing her in cruel ways. What should I do?

A: Report her to the authorities.

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**Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

**Dvar Torah: Parshat Nitzavim & Rosh Hashana**

You are what you do.

This powerful message emerges for us from the beginning of Parshat Nitzavim which is always read close to Rosh Hashana.

Hashem declares 'Atem Nitzavim hayom kulachem lifnei Hashem Elokeichem' – 'all of you are standing here this day, before the Lord your God' and some categories of people are given: sosheichem, shifteichem, zikneichem v'shotreichem – your leaders, your tribes, your elders, your officers. And then other examples follow: your children, the women, the strangers, from the hewers of wood to the drawers of water but there is one word which does not fit into this context, it's the term 'shifteichem' – 'your tribes' – because all the others refer to specific categories of people. Elders, officers, but what do we mean by tribes? Rashi explains that very simply, rosheichem shifteichem should be read as rosheichem l'shifteichem – which would mean the leaders of your tribes. But the trouble is, that is not what the Torah actually says!

Some of our other mefarshim (commentators) explain that actually, shevet doesn't only mean tribe – it also means staff, the item that the leader carries and therefore it describes the leader.

It's like 'The crown' which is a term used to describe a monarch because the monarch wears a crown. Similarly, 'First Violin' refers to the most significant person in the orchestra because they play the first violin. So to with shifteichem which can mean your staff and it refers to the people who carry that staff – those who are leaders, parents, educators, etc. If you are a leader you are a shevet because, you carry the staff in your hand, so to speak. And in English, we refer to the staff as being those who are the 'doers' in a particular capacity.

Hashem wants to convey to us that the essence of what we are is not a title, it's not how people describe us, but rather it's what we do that matters.

We find this expressed in the Shema, the essence of course, is a statement of the depth of our faith in the Almighty. But the Shema altogether has 248 words, as a symbol of the 248 positive commandments and the 248 limbs of the body – showing that the expression of our belief must be found in our actions.

In Anim Zemirot, which we all love to sing or to hear, we have a beautiful line: 'dimo otcha v'lo kfi yeshcha'. This is the way of the Almighty and the same applies to people. 'Dimu otcha' – when we imagine you and evaluate you, 'v'lo kfi yeshcha' – it is not according to your essence or your title, 'vayeshavucha' the value we attach to you, 'lfi ma'asecha' according to what you do. Hashem is great because of his actions, what he does for us. And we can only attain greatness, not through titles or positions but rather through our deeds.

As we approach the High Holy Days, let's take advantage of these Days of Awe to change ourselves and in that way change the world around us. The way to do it is through action.

From Parshat Nitzavim we learn that it is the actions that count – you are what you do.

*Shabbat Shalom and shana tova.*

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***Nitzavim: Handling Blessings***

***Ben-Tzion Spitz***

*You must pay the price if you wish to secure the blessing. - Andrew Jackson*

Moses continues describing the blessings that God will bestow on the people of Israel. He declares:

And the Lord your God will grant you abounding prosperity in all your undertakings, in the issue of your womb, the offspring of your cattle,

and the produce of your soil. For the Lord will again delight in your well-being, as He did in that of your fathers. – Deuteronomy 30:9

The Berdichever ties his explanation of how blessings work to the upcoming holiday of Rosh Hashana. On Rosh Hashana God judges the world, the Jewish nation, and each of us individuals. He decides and decrees our fate for the coming year. Who will live and who will die; who will be healthy and who will be sick; who will be rich and who will be poor; and everything that will occur to us in the coming year.

We, of course, pray for blessings. We pray for life, for health, for income, for joy, for safety, and for success in all our efforts. And God wants to shower us with blessings. He really does. The Berdichever quotes the popular Talmudic dictum: "More than the calf wants to drink, the cow wants to nurse." God wants to give us blessings even more than we want to receive them.

However, the Berdichever explains, we don't always receive the blessings we request. We need to be capable and ready to actually accept and handle the blessing. We aren't always ready for the blessings.

When we pray and make a request of God and God deems us prepared to receive the requested blessing, it gives God tremendous joy. He bestows the blessings happily.

However, if we're not ready, it saddens God. It saddens Him that He is in some fashion prevented from acquiescing to our requests – for our own good. Just as a plant that receives too much water can be drowned, so too, if we haven't made ourselves into an appropriate receptacle to receive the blessings we seek, God's showering our requests upon us could damage us (just look at the tragic history of many lottery winners). God's prevention of sending blessings our way is in fact an indictment of Him. When the Heavenly Court is reviewing each individual's case, and hears everyone's pleas and requests, God's inability to grant our requests because of our unsuitability is embarrassing to Him. He wishes He could, but knows that were He to follow through with our hearts desire, it would be damaging and destructive to us. He can't bestow the particular blessings until we're ready.

May we be indeed become worthy and ready to receive all the blessings we hope for.

*Shabbat Shalom and Ktiva Ve'chatimah Tovah,*

*Dedication - To the OU's fantastic Torah New York event.*

*Shabbat Shalom*

*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.*

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***Shema Yisrael Torah Network***

***Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Nitzavim***

***פרשת נצבים השעט***

**אתם נצבים היום כלכם... לעברך בברית ד' אלקיך**

**You are standing today, all of you... for you to pass into the covenant of Hashem, your G-d. (29:9,11)**

Moshe *Rabbeinu* begins by speaking in the plural to everyone as a group. He divided the people into groups/categories to suggest that everyone has a mutual responsibility towards one another. Obviously, some groups are larger; the larger the group, the more it is possible to reach out to the masses. Leaders with stronger influence are able to reach a larger group than those who are neither influential, nor are part of a large group. Nonetheless, each and every one must do his best in order to reach out and positively affect others. Interestingly, the Torah begins with Moshe speaking in the plural. When he addresses the Covenant and the people's responsibility to pass into it, however, he changes to *lashon yachid*, singular. Why is this? Furthermore, *Rashi* quotes the *Midrash*, "Why is *Parashas Nitzavim* juxtaposed upon the ninety-eight *kelalos*, curses, of *Parshas Ki Savo*? (*Chazal* teach) Because when *Klal Yisrael* learned about the ninety-eight curses and what was in store for them if they did not properly observe the Torah, their faces turned 'green' as they lamented, "Who can possibly withstand these terrible curses?" Moshe (in *Parashas Nitzavim*) appeases them with the words, *Atem nitzavim ha'yom*, 'You are (still) standing

here today.’ Despite your mutinous rebellion, bickering and complaining, you are still standing here today.” (In other words, if Hashem would have acted upon your insolence to the full degree of *Middas Ha’Din*, Attribute of Strict Justice, you would not be standing here today. He did not. This is why you are here. This might be comforting concerning their past indiscretions, but what about the future? What will protect them from tomorrow’s punishment?)

The *Maor Va’Shemesh* explains that this is why Moshe commenced his speech in the plural, with an all-inclusive detailing of the varied categories of Jews who were all standing together as one. Moshe was intimating: As long as you are all together *b’achdus*, unified, living in harmony with one another (without the backstabbing and undermining), with love and respect governing everyone’s relationships, we have hope, and, when we have hope, we have no fear of devastation or punishment.

*Atem nitzavim* – You will stand, have endurance, as long as *kol ish Yisrael*, all Jews, collectively, leaders of the tribes, elders, officers, small children, women, converts, and members of all professions (regardless of the dignity of their work or the size of their financial portfolio). Only through unified, harmonious relationships among all Jews, regardless of their status in life, will there be a protective force against the terrible punishments. As long as *l’avrechecha b’Bris*, that you all pass into the Covenant together as one (singular), you are safe. This lesson applied not only to them, but to all future generations.

*Hashem Echad*: as the Almighty is One, He wants His chosen people, His children, to be unified and live in harmony as one. *Horav Yechiel Michel Stern, Shlita, Rav of Ezras Torah*, observes that the *Kohanim* (in the *Bais HaMikdash*) would ascend to the *Duchan* without shoes. The *Talmud (Sotah 40a)* explains that if a sandal of one of the *Kohanim* tore it would be embarrassing, to the point that he might not go up to the *Duchan* to bless the nation. If a *Kohen* does not go up, it allows people (not the decent people, but those who thrive on negativity) to conjecture that he might be a ben *gerushah*, son of a woman who was divorced. (A *Kohen* is not permitted to marry a divorcee, thus invalidating his child from *Kehunah*, the Priesthood. He is called a *challal*, profaned *Kohen*) The chances of: A) the sandal tearing, B) the *Kohen* not ascending; or C) people will talk, are remote. Yet, since a remote possibility exists that a fellow Jew might be humiliated, the *halachah* was instituted that *Kohanim* do not wear shoes when they ascend the *Duchan*. This demonstrates the power of *achdus*, unity, and how far we should go to preserve the unity of Jews.

*Echad*, one, is *b’gematria*, numerically equivalent, to thirteen. Likewise, *ahavah*, love, is also thirteen. The only way to achieve true oneness is when both parties manifest true love for one another. It was such harmony, *k’ish echad b’lev echad*, “like one man with one heart” (*Rashi, Shemos 19:2*) that represented the backdrop for the Giving of the Torah. Otherwise, it would not have occurred. *Klal Yisrael* must be *b’achdus*, in a state of unity. There are times when this phenomenon is overtly seen (as notes *Horav Mordechai Schwab, zl*) such as a visit to the *Kosel* on a Friday night when everyone is dancing. No distinction among the participants is apparent. No one seems to care what form of head-covering others are wearing: black hat, *shtreimel*, *kippah serugah*, black velvet or white rayon yarmulke; as long as one is Jewish, he is welcomed. This is one of many instances of such unity, because, despite the diversity, our nation is built upon – and exists through – the underpinnings of love that we harbor for all Jews.

*Rav Schwab* relates that he heard his revered *Rebbe, Horav Boruch Ber Leibowitz, zl*, (Kaminetz) say, “When I come up to Heaven, and they ask me, “What did you do in the *Olam Hatachton*, World below? Did you study Torah? What about your *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven?” I will respond that I fell short of my obligation, but there is one statement that I can say unequivocally: ‘I loved Jews!’” This was evident in his demeanor. When *Rav Baruch Ber* would see another Jew walking in the street, he wanted to go over and bless him (so great was his *ahavas Yisrael*). When a Jew came from America, he would rise up and kiss him, so excited and overflowing with love was he for every Jew.

How does one achieve that level of *k’ish echad b’lev echad*? *Rav Schwab* quoted *Rabbeinu Yonah* (commentary to *Pirkei Avos 3:17*), “If there is no *derech eretz* (character refinement) there is no Torah!” *Rabbeinu Yonah* explains that one must first perfect his *middos*, character traits, before he can become a vessel in which Torah can repose. (It goes without saying that the entire concept of unity does not apply to a person whose *middos* are deficient. Such a person cannot possibly connect with other Jews.) Without the “preface,” “foreword” to the book, we have no “book.” *Middos tovos* are the preface to the Torah.

Our People are guided by the principle of *V’ahavia l’reiacha kamocho*, “Love your fellow as yourself.” This is a *mitzvah* in the Torah, but it also defines how Jews should look at, and out for one another. It is not enough for Jews to get along with one another; they must care for one another and feel each other’s pain and joy. As *Rav Schwab* declares: *Men darf trachten vegen yenem*; “We must think about the other fellow.” He/she should be on our minds.

Veritably, feeling pain, experiencing joy, should cross “party” lines. Our individual approach to *Yiddishkeit* should not be the barometer for determining our relationships with our fellow Jews. (At this point, I must emphasize that *k’ish echad b’lev echad* was in preparation for accepting the Torah. While our responsibility towards all Jews of all stripes is without question, those of our brothers who have rejected the Torah and, in some circumstances, have reneged further – although biologically Jewish and fully our brothers and sisters – are certainly not on the same page with regard to *k’ish echad b’lev echad*.)

I quote a well-known story that underscores and gives meaning to the concept of Jewish unity. It was during Napoleon’s Russian invasion that a group of highly trained, elite soldiers became stuck in a snowstorm, compelling them to spend the night in the home of a devout Jew who happened to live in the area in which they were stranded. These were Napoleon’s finest soldiers, members of his cavalry who were comfortable in most any battlefield. Nonetheless, they were not accustomed to the brutal Russian winter. They had never experienced such a snowstorm.

As they were getting comfortable for the night, one of the soldiers looked out the window and gazed upon (what he considered to be) an extraordinary sight. An elderly man (Jew) was sitting in a carriage being pulled by two very old horses. They were trekking with ease through the heavy snow as if they were taking a walk in the park. The soldier asked, “How is it possible for those two old horses to make their way through the snow when our highly trained, young, strong horses could not make it?”

Their host went to the window, looked outside, and smiled when he saw who it was that was sitting in the carriage. It was none other than his good friend and neighbor out for a quiet evening ride.

“I have known this man for quite some time. He has owned those horses since their birth. Those two horses grew up on the same farm and, for all intents and purposes, are inseparable. What makes them so special is that, as a result of their closeness and “upbringing”, they feel each other’s pain. When the man whips one horse, the other one immediately feels its pain and, as a result, pushes harder as well. They may be two separate bodies, but they are actually (more like) one horse. It is because both of these horses are working in tandem with one another that they are able to plow through any storm.” This is the meaning of true *achdus*: two hearts beating as one.

כי אתם ידעתם את אשר ישבנו בארץ מצרים ואת אשר עברנו בקרב הגוים אשר עברתם ותראה את שקוציהם

**For you know that we dwelled in the land of Egypt and how we passed through the midst of the nations through whom you passed. And you saw their abominations. (29:15,16)**

Rationalization allows one to convince himself that the wrong he is committing is actually not so bad, and might even be good. By rationalizing our actions, we seek to legitimize them. We know better, but our *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, seems to get the better of us by clouding the evil, the immoral, the dishonest – and painting it with a veneer of respectability – even righteousness. In the above *pasuk*, the

Torah warns us that despite our knowing firsthand about the evils of idolatry and the moral turpitude that defined the cultures in which we had previously lived, we might know right from wrong – good from evil – but this does not stop us from rationalizing that what we are doing is right.

Interestingly, in the course of the *pasuk*, the syntax changes in terms of Moshe *Rabbeinu's* inclusion with the nation. The *pasuk* begins, “we dwelled”; and “we passed”, and it concludes with Moshe seemingly removing himself from the picture with, “you passed.” *Horav Shneur Kotler, zl*, cites the *pasuk* which informs Moshe of the impending demise of his brother, Aharon *HaKohen*: “Hashem said to Moshe and Aharon at *Har Hor* by the border of Edam, saying, ‘Aharon shall be gathered to his people’” (*Bamidbar* 20:23,24). *Rashi* comments concerning the geographical locus of his death (by the border of Edom), “This statement teaches us that because they wished to join themselves in close friendship with the wicked, a breach was made in their actions and they had to lose this righteous man, Aharon.” *Rashi* indicates that they wished to join with the descendants of Eisav. Where did this occur?

The *Chasam Sofer, zl*, explains that Moshe sent a message to the king of Edom, saying, “We will not drink the water from your wells.” Afterwards, the nation sent the following message, “If we will drink your water we will pay their value.” Moshe refused to drink the Edomite’s water, because he and the nation had heretofore been drinking the water from the *Be’erah shel Miriam*, well of Miriam *Ha’Neviah*. This was consecrated water which could not be replaced by the water belonging to the Edomites. Thus, he said, “We will not drink your water.” The nation disagreed. They would be happy to drink their water. “Enough of the holy water, holy *manna*. What about some ‘regular’ food?” This change in their attitude (according to *Rashi*) represents a desire to join forces, to develop a close friendship with this nation, thereby catalyzing their loss of Aharon, the *tzaddik*, in their midst.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* applies the *Chasam Sofer's* elucidation to explain why Moshe now disassociated himself from them. The fact that they were prepared to exchange the holy water from Miriam’s well indicated their spiritual descent. They were no longer the same nation, sanctified to G-d. Only Moshe remained on his spiritual status-quo. Moshe and the nation were no longer on the same level.

This is an ongoing problem. Well-meaning people (at least in their own minds) seek every opportunity to gain favor in the eyes of the outside world by making every attempt to emulate them: in manner of dress, speech, demeanor, social/cultural activities. This is due to a lack of spiritual self-esteem, resulting from a lack of spiritual activity and involvement. It is almost as if it is not socially acceptable to eat in a kosher restaurant, because it is not *au’courant*/in vogue. Obviously, they will not outright consume non-kosher food, just on the fringe, unacceptable as kosher, all because it is not “fashionable.” We must never forget that when we turn our backs on Hashem, we can expect some sort of reciprocity.

**ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע ובהרת בחיים**

**See: I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil... and you shall choose life. (30:15,19)**

Hashem commands us to choose life. Makes sense. Really, it is not much of a choice, unless one has a misguided understanding of the meaning of “life.” Understandably, one who negates the “life” choice instead (also) chooses *ra*, evil. Life joins with good, death with evil. A negative choice concerning life is a positive choice of evil. The Torah previously stated that Hashem presents us with good and evil, which means that evil has its own “standing.” It is a creation just as much as any other creation. In other words, evil is not simply the absence of good. It is a separate creation, allowing for a choice: Do we want to follow and adhere to the kingdom of good and its associated principles, such as holiness, ethicality, morality; or do we abscond to the world of evil, which encompasses impurity, immorality, impiety and ungodly behavior?

*Horav Yechiel Michel Feinstein, zl*, distinguishes between the concept of evil as the absence of good and evil, the creation. If evil were

nothing more than the absence of good, all one would have to do is be good, *asei tov*. Now that we are aware that even when we perform *tov*, good, however, it does not negate the evil, we have an added responsibility to expunge evil wherever we see it. Performing *mitzvos* and carrying out acts of loving kindness alone will not destroy evil. Ignoring the insidiousness in our midst will not make evil go away. It lurks in the background, waiting for the propitious moment when it can challenge the integrity of our spiritual commitment.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* observes that from the very moment of our induction into nationhood, we have been beset upon by our archenemy, Amalek, who attempted to destroy us. Amalek’s war against Hashem and His People has been waged for generations. Indeed, to this very day, every inch of *kedushah*, holiness, that we gain is only with a struggle. Eisav’s present day minions do not relinquish anything without a battle. Evil is not going away. It must be uprooted, or else it will overwhelm us.

The question is: How do we battle evil? First and foremost is our need to recognize and repudiate evil. The *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, is very clear. It conceals its evil behind a façade of goodness. If evil is real, not simply the absence of truth – a negation of light, then we must be able to agree on its definition, its parameters, and harmful, enduring influence upon us. Unfortunately, in the area of defining evil (as in so many other aspects of religious observance), we do not seem to have a consensus. This, too, is part of the ability of the *yetzer hora* to cloud the issues and present the most egregious activity as progressive.

Having said this, we return to our original question: How do we battle evil? One opinion is that evil does not have its own power. It receives its strength from us, from our fear of it. The greater our fear of the evil, the stronger it becomes. When we compromise with evil, we give it strength. When we worry about the evil, we foster its ability to control us. The greater our obsequiousness to evil, the more we empower it. Thus, if we disregard the evil, we actually deflate it, devoiding it of its power. Evil is equated with darkness. As long as we have light darkness has no power, because there is no darkness. Light expunges darkness. The greater our acts of good, the greater the light that we generate, thus eradicating the darkness.

Others feel that one must actually battle the forces of evil. As mentioned, once evil is acknowledged, we must fight against it – aggressively. This refers to every form of evil that challenges us personally and collectively. Passive resistance only permits the evil to become stronger. We must do everything within our power, never giving up. With faith in Hashem, we will be able to overcome our physical and spiritual enemies. Indeed, how we respond to evil defines us and our commitment to good.

**ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע ובהרת בחיים**

**See: I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil... And you should choose life. (30:15,19)**

What is the meaning of life? Obviously, it does not mean merely to exist, because everyone wants to live. We would not require Hashem to instruct us to choose life. Man is a composite of body and soul. The physical body seeks comfort and self-gratification. The Heavenly soul seeks spiritual elevation and the opportunity to get close in order to cling to the Almighty. It seeks a life of meaning and fulfillment, a life of value and purpose. As *Horav Noach Weinberg, zl*, explains, human life is a constant internal struggle between the physicality of the body and the spirituality of the soul. The day begins with the alarm clock ringing. The soul wants to declare, *Modeh ani*, “Thank You,” Hashem, for another day of life, another day of striving to get closer to You via the many opportunities for spiritual growth available to me. The body, on the other hand, wants to turn over and return to sleep. In other words, the soul wants life; the body seeks “death.”

Is “death” not too strong a term to describe returning to sleep? For, if that were the case, it would mean that each of us is carrying a death wish around with us. To understand this (death wish that exists within each of us), the *Rosh Yeshivah* first explains the opposite of

“pain.” He distinguishes between common terms that are improperly defined, and, thus, are misleading. One would think that the opposite of pain is pleasure. It is untrue. The opposite of pain is no pain. No pain equals comfort. We often confuse comfort with pleasure. Another untruth. Comfort is the absence of pain. Comfort is numbing the sensation of falling asleep. The ultimate experience of feeling no pain is death. Pleasure, on the other hand, entails pain. Real pleasure and fulfillment are the result of pushing ourselves to take on and tackle the challenge. One who errs in his definition of pleasure ignores the alarm clock, comes late to *davening* (if he even bothers attending) and makes a farce of the value and meaning of *tefillah b'tzibbur*, *davening* with a *minyan*. If this is how he starts his day, what can we really expect of the rest of the day?

*Chazal* (*Kiddushin* 30b) teach that the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, threatens to overpower a person every day and seeks to kill

him. If not for Hashem Who intervenes and helps the person (who seeks help), we would be unable to conquer the *yetzer hora*. *Chazal* are teaching us that we have a death wish – an evil inclination who seeks to kill us. Without Hashem, we would be powerless to emerge triumphant. Hashem infuses us with the power to choose life. It is a painful decision, but “no pain, no gain.” Unless we are willing to put forth the effort, we will fail. Is life not worth a little pain?

*In memory of a dear friend on the occasion of his yahrzeit*

החבר הרב צבי בן החבר ר' משה'ל

נפ' ד' תשרי תשע"ג Mr. Bjorn Bamberger

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לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה

ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה