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Weekly Parsha NITZAVIM

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

In emphasizing once again the eternal validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people, Moshe addresses his words to the entire nation. All classes of society are included in the covenant – the heads of the people, the judges, the wealthy and powerful, the poor, menial and manual laborers, and those that chop the wood and draw the water. No one is excluded from the terms of the covenant and no one is allowed the luxury of assuring one's self that Jewish destiny will not apply to him or her.

Judaism does not have two sets of rules, one for the elite and the other for the masses. It is an equal opportunity faith. Its leaders, be they temporal or spiritual, are bound to the same code of behavior. There may be exceptional people in every generation but there are no exceptions to the efficacy of the covenant on all of Israel.

Unlike other faiths that have different rules and mores for their clergy than they do for the lay population, Judaism does not even recognize the existence of a clergy class. There is no separate Shulchan Aruch for rabbis. The covenant binds and governs us all equally. We see throughout Tanach that kings and prophets were held to the same standards and requirements of the covenant that apply to the ordinary citizen as well. The power of the covenant is all encompassing and embraces all generations – those that have gone before us, those that are currently present and those that will yet come after us. This is the key to understanding the Jewish story from the time of Moshe until today.

The Torah recognizes the nature of human beings. It knows that we all procrastinate and make rational excuses for our shortcomings. Therefore, the concept of the covenant is a necessary facet of all human existence and especially so for the Jewish people.

The covenant of the rainbow exists to remind us of the wonders of the natural world in which we are temporary guests. The covenant of history, of which the Jewish people is the primary example in the

human story reminds us of the Creator's involvement in human affairs, unseen but omnipresent.

The covenant is the great net which encloses us all, even those who somehow have convinced themselves that they swim freely in the waters of life. The binding, and many times, tragic effects of the covenant are part of the Torah readings of this week's parsha and that of last week as well. The events that befell the Jewish people over the last century amply show that the dread engendered by the force of the covenant is justified and real. But the covenant has an optimistic and hopeful side to it, in its promise of redemption and restitution to greatness and tranquility. We are a covenantal people. And though we each possess freedom of will, the terms of the covenant control our national destiny and our personal lives as well.

Shabbat shalom

Shana tova

Rabbi Berel Wein

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

NITZAVIM - Why Judaism?

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ZT"L

This week's parsha raises a question that goes to the heart of Judaism, but which was not asked for many centuries until raised by a great Spanish scholar of the fifteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Arama. Moses is almost at the end of his life. The people are about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Moses knows he must do one thing more before he dies. He must renew the covenant between the people and God.

This nation's parents had entered into that commitment almost forty years before when they stood at Mount Sinai and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we shall do and we shall heed." (Ex. 24:7) But now Moses has to ensure that the next generation and all future generations will be bound by it. He wanted no-one to be able to say, "God made a covenant with my ancestors but not with me. I did not give my consent. I was not there. I am not bound." That is why Moses says:

Not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath; with you who are standing here with us today before the Lord our God I make it, and with those, too, who are not with us today.

Deut. 29:13-14

“Those who are not with us today” cannot mean Israelites alive at the time who were somewhere else. The entire nation was present at the assembly. It means “generations not yet born.” That is why the Talmud says: we are all *mushba ve-omed meHar Sinai*, “foresworn from Sinai.” (Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a)

Hence one of the most fundamental facts about Judaism: converts excepted, we do not choose to be Jews. We are born as Jews. We become legal adults, subject to the commands, at age twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A *bat* or *bar mitzvah* is not a “confirmation”. It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said “Not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath... with those, too, who are not with us today,” meaning all future generations. But how can this be so? There is no obligation without consent. How can we be subject to a commitment on the basis of a decision taken long ago by our distant ancestors? To be sure, in Jewish law you can confer a benefit on someone else without their consent. But though it is surely a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices. Why then are we bound now by what the Israelites said then?

Jewishly, this is the ultimate question. How can religious identity be passed on from parent to child? If identity were merely ethnic, we could understand it. We inherit many things from our parents – most obviously our genes. But being Jewish is not a genetic condition. It is a set of religious obligations.

The Sages gave an answer in the form of a tradition about today’s *parsha*. They said that the souls of all future generations were present at Sinai. As souls, they freely gave their consent, generations before they were born. (Shevuot 39a)

However, Arama argues that this cannot answer our question, since God’s covenant is not with souls only, but also with embodied human beings. We are physical beings with physical desires. We can understand that the soul would agree to the covenant. What does the soul desire if not closeness to God?[1] But the assent that counts is that of living, breathing human beings with bodies, and we cannot assume that they would agree to the Torah with its many restrictions on eating, drinking, sexual relations and the rest. Not until we are born, and are old enough to understand what is being asked of us can we give our

consent in a way that binds us. Therefore the fact that the unborn generations were present at Moses’ covenant ceremony does not give us the answer we need.

In essence, Arama was asking: Why be Jewish? What is fascinating is that he was the first to ask this question since the age of the Talmud. Why was it not asked before? Why was it first asked in fifteenth century Spain? For many centuries the question, “Why be Jewish?” did not arise. The answer was self-evident. I am Jewish because that is what my parents were and theirs before them, back to the dawn of Jewish time. Existential questions arise only when we feel there is a choice. For much of history, Jewish identity was not a choice. It was a fact of birth, a fate, a destiny. It was not something you chose, any more than you choose to be born.

In fifteenth-century Spain, Jews were faced with a choice. Spanish Jewry experienced its *Kristallnacht* in 1391, and from then on until the expulsion in 1492, Jews found themselves excluded from more and more areas of public life. There were immense pressures on them to convert, and some did so. Of these, some maintained their Jewish identity in secret, but others did not. For the first time in many centuries, staying Jewish came to be seen not just as a fate but as a choice. That is why Arama raised the question that had been unasked for so long. It is also why, in an age in which everything significant seems open to choice, it is being asked again in our time.

Arama gave one answer. I gave my own in my book *A Letter in the Scroll*.^[2] But I also believe a large part of the answer lies in what Moses himself said at the end of his address:

“I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today. I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life – so that you and your children may live...”

Deut. 30:19

Choose life. No religion, no civilisation, has insisted so strenuously and consistently that we can choose. We have it in us, says Maimonides, to be as righteous as Moses or as evil as Jeroboam.^[3] We can be great. We can be small. We can choose.

The ancients – with their belief in fate, fortune, *Moirai*, *Ananke*, the influence of the stars or the arbitrariness of nature – did not fully believe in human freedom. For them true freedom meant, if you were religious, accepting fate, or if you were philosophical, the consciousness of necessity. Nor do most scientific

atheists believe in it today. We are determined, they say, by our genes. Our fate is scripted in our DNA. Choice is an illusion of the conscious mind. It is the fiction we tell ourselves.

Judaism says no. Choice is like a muscle: use it or lose it. Jewish law is an ongoing training regime in willpower. Can you eat this and not that? Can you exercise spiritually three times a day? Can you rest one day in seven? Can you defer the gratification of instinct – what Freud took to be the mark of civilisation? Can you practise self-control (which, according to the “Marshmallow Test”, is the surest sign of future success in life)?[4] To be a Jew means not going with the flow, not doing what others do just because they are doing it. It gives us 613 exercises in the power of will to shape our choices. That is how we, with God, become co-authors of our lives. “We have to be free”, said Isaac Bashevis Singer, “we have no choice!”

Choose life. In many other faiths, life down here on earth with its loves, losses, triumphs, and defeats, is not the highest value. Heaven is to be found in life after death, or the soul in unbroken communion with God, or in acceptance of the world-that-is. Life is eternity, life is serenity, life is free of pain. But that, for Judaism, is not quite life. It may be noble, spiritual, sublime, but it is not life in all its passion, responsibility, and risk.

Judaism teaches us how to find God down here on earth not up there in heaven. It means engaging with life, not taking refuge from it. It seeks not so much happiness as joy: the joy of being with others and together with them making a blessing over life. It means taking the risk of love, commitment, loyalty. It means living for something larger than the pursuit of pleasure or success. It means daring greatly.

Judaism does not deny pleasure, for it is not ascetic. It does not worship pleasure. Judaism is not hedonist. Instead it sanctifies pleasure. It brings the Divine Presence into the most physical acts: eating, drinking, intimacy. We find God not just in the synagogue but in the home, the house of study, and acts of kindness; we find God in community, hospitality, and wherever we mend some of the fractures of our human world.

No religion has ever held the human person in higher regard. We are not tainted by original sin. We are not a mere bundle of selfish genes. We are not an inconsequential life-form lost in the vastness of the universe. We are the being on whom God has set His image and likeness. We are the people God has

chosen to be His partners in the work of creation. We are the nation God married at Sinai with the Torah as our marriage contract. We are the people God called on to be His witnesses. We are the ambassadors of heaven in the country called earth.

We are not better, or worse, than others. We are simply different, because God values difference whereas for most of the time, human beings have sought to eliminate difference by imposing one faith, one regime or one empire on all humanity. Ours is one of the few faiths to hold that the righteous of all nations have a share in heaven because of what they do on earth.

Choose life. Nothing sounds easier yet nothing has proved more difficult over time. Instead, people choose substitutes for life. They pursue wealth, possessions, status, power, fame, and to these gods they make the supreme sacrifice, realising too late that true wealth is not what you own but what you are thankful for, that the highest status is not to care about status, and that influence is more powerful than power.

That is why, though few faiths are more demanding, most Jews at most times have stayed faithful to Judaism, living Jewish lives, building Jewish homes, and continuing the Jewish story. That is why, with a faith as unshakeable as it has proved true, Moses was convinced that “not with you alone am I making this covenant and oath... with those, too, who are not with us today.” His gift to us is that through worshipping something so much greater than ourselves we become so much greater than we would otherwise have been.

Why Judaism? Because there is no more challenging way of choosing life.

[1] Isaac Arama, *Akeidat Yitzhak*, Deuteronomy, Nitzavim.

[2] *A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2000). Published in Britain as *Radical Then, Radical Now: The Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion* (London: HarperCollins, 2001).

[3] *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:2.

[4] Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test*, Bantam Press, 2014.

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Nitzavim (Deuteronomy 29:9- 30:20)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse: therefore choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

What does it mean to choose life?

Is life ours to choose? The Torah should have written to “choose good,” which I would understand, because good seems within my control. But life and death? Go tell the children in a cancer ward to choose life! How many young people receive harsh decrees from heaven? So what does it mean to “choose life”?

A person can choose life! As Sigmund Freud taught, built into the human psyche is not only a passion for life, but also a passion for death; not only a will to create, but also a will to destroy – and sometimes even to self-destruct.

The first thing one must do is to avoid the lure of death. Despite the awareness of danger in certain lifestyles – indiscriminate sex, excessive alcohol, drugs etc. – many pursue thrills until the last chill, when it’s too late.

Good and evil are abstractions; a genius in the art of rationalization only requires one hour to totally confuse himself and others about their moral foundations. But life and death are not abstractions. People who overdose on drugs or alcohol are real. And when the Torah says “choose life,” it means avoid a lifestyle, or fanatical religion, which promotes death rather than life.

A second, less dramatic way, of choosing life is by not wasting time; hours spent in front of the TV, at best watching people running in pursuit of a ball and at worst inviting violence and pornography into our homes. We don’t need an accountant to inform us that the hours soon become days, weeks, even months. The simple act of shutting off most programs on TV and opening a worthwhile book is an example of choosing life.

In modern Hebrew, the term for going out and having a good time is *levalot* – which is derived from *bilui*, a word which actually means to wear something out, to turn a usable garment into an outworn rag. In modern Hebrew slang, the expression *lisrof zman*, to burn time, is equivalent to the Americanism “to kill time,” all pointing to the inherent destruction in improper time management.

You can commit suicide in one moment. Or you can commit suicide in a lifetime of wasted moments. The number of years a person is given is not under their control, but what we do with the moments God has

given us, is. If we choose not to waste these precious moments, we have “chosen life.”

And there is yet a third way to choose life, in the larger sense of the word – not just life as the avoidance of death, but life in its fullest meaning.

An older version of the Targum (Aramaic translation of the Bible) on the verse, “...Not by bread alone does the human being live, but by that which proceeds from God’s mouth does the human being live” (Deut. 8:3), is revealing. It translates, “Not on bread alone does the human being exist (*mitkayem*) but on what proceeds from God’s mouth does the human being live (*hayei*).”

Bread gives us *kiyum* – existence, the ability to stand on our feet, to work, to survive. But that which emanates from God’s mouth provides life with meaning, purpose, participation in eternity.

Material subsistence is existence; spiritual and intellectual engagement in improving self and society is life. Bread is existence; Shabbat and compassion are life. Food, clothing and shelter are necessities, but they are necessities for existence.

Humans require an objective which goes beyond existence. As noted psychologist-philosopher and founder of logotherapy Victor Frankel discovered in the concentration camps, the most important drive within humans is not the will for pleasure or even the will for power, but the will for meaning. Those who had a higher meaning, who were involved in helping others survive, in calculating in their heads different mathematical or philosophical problems or in preserving and copying segments from the prayer books or the Bible from memory stood a better chance of surviving the horrendous living conditions of the concentration camps.

This search for purpose beyond one’s own physical survival, this quest for self-transcendence and reaching out for the infinite, is what comes forth from God’s mouth and it is what the Targum refers to as “life.”

The search for pleasure is linked to the body, and since the body is finite, the fruits of the search are also finite. The Torah is immortal and infinite.

An individual home is destructible; the Land of Israel for the people of Israel is eternal. Materialistic goods are existence; Torah and Israel are life. The keeping of the commandments and the inheritance of the Land of Israel are in themselves involvement with eternity, participating in eternity. This is the real meaning of the Biblical command: Choose life!

Insights Parshas Nitzavim - Elul 5782

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

*This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of
Zev Volf ben Yosef. "May his Neshama have an
Aliya!"*

The Real You

*[...] there among the nations that I have banished
you, you will reflect on the situation. You will then
return to Hashem your God and you will obey him
[...] You and your children (will repent) with all your
heart and soul (30:1-2).*

Ramban understands the verse, "This commandment that you are charged (to obey) isn't hidden nor far off from you" (30:11), as referring to the mitzvah of teshuvah that is introduced above (30:1-2). Ramban continues; "this mitzvah is, in fact, not hard to do and it can be done at all times and in all places."

Ramban's description of the mitzvah of teshuvah as rather easy can be difficult to comprehend. After all, year after year, we seem to find ourselves in the same situation and repenting for the same sins as in previous years. Ramban's comment on the ease of teshuvah is reminiscent of the not-yet-reformed smoker who says "quitting smoking is the easiest thing in the world – I have done it a hundred times."

This becomes even more troubling when we examine Maimonides' description of teshuvah (Yad Hilchos Teshuvah 2:2): "What constitutes teshuvah? A sinner must abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again [...] Similarly, he must regret the past. He must attain a level that he knows (that the Almighty) will testify for him that he will never return to this sin again [...]. He must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart."

Clearly, the objective is to regret the past and pledge to never again commit those sins again. How can anyone honestly come back year after year and say the exact same words, asking forgiveness for the same sins time and time again? At what point is it no longer believable? Even in the case of the truly penitent, how can he look himself in the mirror after resolving to no longer commit the sins that he knows he'll be repenting for again next Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? What kind of teshuvah is this? What honest commitment can one possibly make? The answer to

this question is probably the key to understanding what we are trying to accomplish during these "ten days of repentance."

In all likelihood you, or someone you know, has struggled with their weight at some point. Imagine, for a moment, someone who is very overweight, but has committed to a strict diet, suddenly facing a crucial test: a pizza pie with all the toppings, accompanied by two extra-large orders of fries, has "miraculously" been delivered to them. Obviously, some people will be able to overcome their urge to inhale this pizza and fries (we call them weirdos). But others will likely succumb to their desires. Why?

Most people who succumb to the "pizza test" are thinking, "Let's face it – I weigh 300 lbs., who am I kidding?" and proceed to devour the entire pizza and fries. In other words, the reason they continue down the same path is because they look at themselves as overweight. Their diet was rooted in trying to change their behavior – when they really should have been focused on trying to change themselves. Therefore, they aren't dealing with this as a new situation; they are, in reality, succumbing to their past mistakes and accepting that as their reality. This new eating indiscretion is rooted in their past behavior, which is why they fail.

This is exactly what teshuvah is supposed to address; when we commit to doing teshuvah we have to 1) regret the past 2) resolve to no longer commit the transgression. In other words, we commit to making a real change. While it is true that we must distance ourselves from how we behaved in the past, our commitment isn't merely a behavioral change, it is a change of self-definition. We must say, "In the coming year I may be faced with a test of the same sin, and hopefully I will be able to restrain myself because I truly do not want to be that type of person." "But even if I fail, it will be because I couldn't control myself, it will absolutely not be a transgression based on my past behavior." At that point one's transgressions are not a repetition of past sins. This is why Ramban says it is not hard to do. One has to merely decide to be the person he wants to become, and commit to leave who he currently is behind. At that point Hashem will help him find the true path to teshuvah (see Ramban on 30:6).

What Are Kids Good For?

Gather together all the people – men, women, small children [...] so that they will hear and so that they will learn and they will fear Hashem [...] (31:12).

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of hakhel – the gathering of the entirety of the Jewish people on the holiday of Sukkos following the shemitta year. The king at that time would read from different sections in the Chumash of Devarim from an elevated platform. The Gemara (Bavli Chagiga 3a) explains that the men came to study and the women came to hear. The Gemara then asks; “Why did the very small children come? To give reward to those that brought them” (ibid).

Maharsha (ad loc) explains that the Gemara wonders why the Torah discusses the children in this verse and then mentions the children again in the very next verse. In fact, the next verse clearly explains that the children are coming to learn from the experience. So, explains Maharsha, the first verse must be talking about children who are too young to gain from the experience. Therefore, the Gemara explains they are only coming in order “to give reward to those that bring them.”

Simply understood, the Gemara seems to be saying that the extra strain of bringing the very young children will bring some kind of reward to their much beleaguered parents. Perhaps this can be understood along the lines of the Talmudic dictum (Avos 5:26) “commensurate to the pain is the reward.” But notwithstanding the fact that children can inflict exquisite discomfort on their parents, this cannot be the sole reason for bringing them. First of all, older children can be even more painful to drag to a speech that they can hardly understand. Second, if it is simply to make the experience more difficult, why shouldn't even people without young children have to do something to make the experience more trying? Why are only parents of very young children worthy of this added aggravation?

Obviously, there has to be another reason why we bring very young children to such a gathering. Have you ever noticed that some sports crazy fans bring their one year old children to baseball and football games decked out in baby sized team jerseys and other team themed items? What possible purpose can there be in such an effort? Clearly, the child will have no recollection of the event or of his parents' single-minded obsession; so, why would someone go to all that effort?

The answer has to be that it is an internalization, for ourselves and our children, that we want our legacy to be connected to this ideal. There are families who take great pride in being multigenerational fans of certain

teams. So too, by the mitzvah of hakhel we are expressing the ideal, that our deepest desire is for our children to be connected and bound to the values of the Torah and the Jewish people. The reason these parents earn special reward isn't because of the added aggravation; it is because they are making the greatest expression of their personal commitment to Hashem and his Torah: They want their children to follow in their footsteps and the legacy of the Jewish people.

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***Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights
For the week ending 24 September 2022 / 28 Elul
5782***

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Parshat Nitzavim

Allegiance to the Crown

“...you shall read this Torah before all Yisrael, in their ears.” (31:11)

An interesting synchronicity takes place this year: When the holy Beit HaMikdash stood, on the first day of Chol HaMoed Sukkot following the Shemitta year (as is this year) the entire nation was commanded to come together at the Beit HaMikdash to hear the king read from the Torah. The theme of the passages that the king reads firstly reflects allegiance to G-d, secondly, G-d's covenant with the Jewish People, and thirdly, reward and punishment.

The theme of all three is loyalty: Allegiance and loyalty are synonymous; a covenant is none other than a formalized expression of an allegiance; and reward and punishment express the outcome of that allegiance.

At some time in the coming year, King Charles III, will be crowned in an elaborate ceremony.

The entire nation will pledge allegiance to the new monarch.

The enormous outpouring of grief and love for the late Queen Elizabeth II showed how much a people need a focus for its nationhood, to show allegiance to the person of the monarch. The Jewish People also has a focus of its national allegiance in the king, but the king expresses his kingship through this mitzvah of Hakhel – the reading of the Torah at the Beit HaMikdash.

The eternal allegiance of the Jewish People to each other and with G-d is through the Torah. This is what

makes us unique among the nations. When a nation bonds through allegiance to its monarch, it is only through him or her as a figurehead of the nation. A Jewish king bonds that nation to the Torah in an eternal allegiance to the King of Kings.

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Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Nitzavim - Take Off the Masks!

Parashat Nitzavim is the last Torah portion we will read this year. The next parasha, Vayelech, will be read between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Nitzavim is the continuation of the previous parasha in which we heard Moses describe the expected future of the Jewish nation for the following generations, with the main theme being that the existence of the Jewish state they are about to establish is not guaranteed. If the nation veers from the divine plan to establish “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” in the Land of Israel, its economic and security status will deteriorate until it is ultimately banished from the land and scattered “among all the nations, from one end of the earth to the other,” a prophecy that fulfilled itself centuries later.

In contrast to the pessimistic tone with which we concluded the previous parasha, this one is more optimistic. It describes how the Land of Israel will be barren and deserted during the entire time the Jewish nation is exiled from it – another prophecy that came true. But after that, the return of the Jewish nation to G-d and to the Land of Israel is described; a return that is both spiritual and physical, two returns between which the Torah is not prepared to distinguish.

and you will return to the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and you will listen to His voice... then, the Lord, your God, will bring back your exiles, and He will have mercy upon you. He will once again gather you from all the nations... And the Lord, your God, will bring you to the land which your forefathers possessed... And the Lord, your God, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, [so that you may] love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul... (Deuteronomy 30, 2-6)

This is just a small section of the prophecy describing the spiritual and physical return to Zion. Let’s focus on the phrase “And the Lord, your God, will circumcise your heart.” This phrase is obviously using the commandment of brit mila metaphorically, a

commandment that expresses the entering of a newborn boy into the Jewish nation with its commitment to Jewish purpose. But the expression is fascinating in relation to human nature and the correct attitude to a person who sins.

The image of teshuva, repentance, as the removal of the foreskin that covers the heart, teaches us that the sin never damages the Jewish inner soul. Behind the “heart’s foreskin” there is a healthy beating heart. It is hard to see because it is hidden behind a screen of mistaken decisions and actions, but all the mistakes are only a façade over the inner soul. A repentant person does not have to create a new personality for himself, but rather just peel off the outer layers and discover the positive core deep inside of himself.

This image also teaches us about the significance of the sin that conceals us. Looking at it simply, it seems to us that sin hides us from society and makes us look bad in a way we think is far from accurate. A deeper look reveals that sin hides us from ourselves. A person who sins gets used to viewing himself negatively, and then he eventually loses hope. But the Torah disagrees. It sees sin as a façade that when removed, we will discover we are not who we imagine but are actually much better.

Furthermore, sin creates a separation between us and G-d, as expressed by the prophet Isaiah, “your iniquities were separating between you and between your God” (Isaiah 59, 2). The greatest happiness a person can attain is a sense of closeness with G-d. This is the peak of religious experience, the greatest in human experience. But sin spoils and distances, separates and conceals. We feel distant, and as a result, feel lonely and miserable.

This week’s parasha teaches us that associating our sins with our personalities is a mistake. A good Jewish soul is hidden behind the shroud of sin. We are called upon to remove the masks and discover our true inner soul, our beating heart, and return to be close to G-d.

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

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Nitzavim

פרשת נצבים תשפ"ב

והיה בשמעו את דברי האלה הזאת והתברך בלבבו לאמר שלום יהיה לי כי בשררות לבי אלך למען ספות הרוה את הצמאה

When he hears the statement of this oath/curse, he will imagine self-blessings, saying, “Peace will be

my lot when I shall follow what my thoughts envision, so that the quenched may be added to the thirsty.” (29:18)

The *pasuk* addresses the observant Jew who does not believe that Torah study is an absolute requirement. *Horav Shimon Schwab, zl*, observes that, throughout *Tanach*, thirst is a metaphor for the Jew’s desire to learn Torah. Torah is compared to water. The *Navi Yeshayah* (55:1) declares, *Hoi kol tzamei la’mayim*; “Ho, everyone who is thirsty, go to water.” *Chazal* comment, “Water is always a symbol for Torah.”

Having said this, we understand the *pasuk* to be intimating that Hashem will not forgive the fellow who is fully satiated (*ravah*) with his *frumkeit*, *mitzvah* observance, considering himself devout and righteous, reasoning that *b’shrirus leebec eilech*, “I will follow what my thoughts envision.” Sadly, some still believe that constant Torah study is not an absolute requisite of Judaism. These individuals who rely on their *mitzvah* observance – even if it is meticulous --- but ignore the obligation to study Torah whenever possible, are committing an egregious and unpardonable sin.

Our Torah is not just a book of laws. Without Torah, ours is no different than any other religion. They have precepts and rituals – so do we. They, however, have no Torah. Hashem speaks to us through Torah whenever we open a *sefer* and learn. The Torah symbolizes Hashem’s relationship with us – His People. No one else, no other religion can make such a claim. Hashem gave **us** the Torah, because he wanted to have His relationship only with us.

In his “Selected Speeches,” *Rav Schwab* cites the well-known *tefillah* composed by *Rav Nechunyah ben Hakanah* which was originally meant to be recited nightly upon leaving the *bais ha’medrash*, but which is instead recited now at the *siyum*, completion of a *meseches*, tractate, of *Talmud*. In this *tefillah* we thank Hashem for allotting our portion to be among the *yoshvei bais hamedrash* and not among the *yoshvei kranos*, those who idle away their time sitting in the corners. *Rashi* explains *yoshvei kranos* as *amei ha’aretz ha’oskim b’sichah*, ignorant people who just converse a lot.

Rav Nechunyah ben Hakanah seems to divide all mankind into two camps: *yoshvei bais ha’medrash* and *yoshvei kranos*. In other words, those who love to learn and to whom Torah study is for them the elixir of life, and those who do not make learning a priority.

The *Rav* cites the *Ramban*, who defines *am ha’aretz* as one *she’sonei chochmah*, who hates to learn Torah. On the other hand, he who loves to learn, but, for some reason is unable to, is still considered *m’yoshvei bais ha’medrash*. His identity is *yoshvei bais ha’medrash*. He is included in that august group devoted to Torah learning, whose love of Hashem transcends all else. He may not personally make it to the *bais ha’medrash*, but he sees to it that his children are regular fixtures there, and he supports those who learn.

On the other hand, says, *Rav Schwab*, there is the world of *Doeg* and *Achitofel*, who are proficient in the entire Torah, yet were such *reshaim*, wicked men, that their lives were cut short. Can we call such contemptible men *yoshvei kranos*? In order to know Torah, they must have spent much time mastering it. Clearly, they attended the *bais ha’medrash*. The *Rav* explains that their Torah study and knowledge was merely superficial – *min ha’safah u’le’chutz*, from their lips outward. True, they went through *shas*, but *shas* did not go through them!

Perhaps we might ratchet this idea up one more notch. Concerning the *pasuk* in *Bereishis* which records the passing of *Sarah Imeinu* (23:1), the *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* notes the true term, *chayei Sarah*, “Sarah’s life,” as opposed to writing, “The days (or years) of Sarah’s life were...” The Torah alludes to an important principle. “The righteous give life to their days. By serving Hashem and investing each day with spirituality, they make their days come alive. *Reshaim*, the wicked, however, their days give them life. Their existence is purely physical, by virtue of the lifespan allotted for them.” How do *tzadikim* give life to their days? When they study Torah to the point that they become one with the Torah, they inject spiritual vitality and life into their days.

The *Chazon Ish* writes (*Iggros* 13): “One who merits to acquire *yedios*, knowledge, of Torah, walks among men and (for all intents and purposes) appears to be the same as they are. Veritably, he is an angel who lives among men; his life is one of (spiritual) nobility.” Such a person is different; everything about him, his entire demeanor is altered through his devotion to the Torah.

The *menahel*, principal, of a certain school wanted to have one of his students admitted to the famed *Ponovezh Yeshivah*. The *Ponovezher Rav, zl*, refused to accept him (for his own reasons). As much as the *menahel* tried to convince the *Rav* to reconsider,

it was not happening. This boy would not be attending Ponovezh. End of story, until... the family asked *Rav Chaim Kanievsky, zl*, to intercede on their behalf. *Rav Chaim* was all of thirty-five years old at the time. He went to the Ponovezher *Rav* and asked him to accept the boy in his *yeshivah*. He was immediately accepted! A number of students (and the *menahel*) asked the *Rav* what had precipitated the change of mind. He replied, "What could I do? The 'Torah itself' asked me to accept the boy. How could I refuse?"

This is how we should view a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, who is wholly devoted to Torah study: one with the Torah. He is transformed into a different entity. I write this during the week of *shivah* for the *Sar HaTorah, Horav Chaim Kanievsky*, an individual whose entire life was devoted to Torah study. Nothing else mattered, because nothing else existed. His life was one of *chovos*, debts, obligations, to studying every aspect and nuance of Torah. These *chovos* weighed heavily on his mind. One is astonished at his *sefer ha'yom*, the order of his day. Every minute was accounted for; every minute was dedicated to learning, and covering various aspects of Torah. There are so many stories which relate and describe his total dedication to the Torah. I selected one of many because it captures not only his devotion, but also that of his *Rebbetzin*.

Rav Chaim asked the *Rebbetzin* that whenever she left the apartment, she should lock the door. Many people sought his audience and it disturbed his learning. This was why a specific time was allotted for *Kabbolas Ha'Khal*, when he would listen, speak and offer blessings to those who came to see him. One time, the *Rebbetzin* forgot to lock the door. *Rav Chaim* noticed that it was unlocked, so he locked it. The *Rebbetzin* returned home and saw that the door was locked. Since she had not locked it originally, she did not have a key to open the door.

It was a sweltering, hot day in Bnei Brak. The *Rebbetzin* began to knock, hoping that her husband would hear and let her in. Twenty minutes of knocking and calling passed until finally *Rav Chaim* opened the door and said, "The *Rebbetzin* is not home," and promptly closed the door! The *Rebbetzin* immediately called out, "Chaim, it's me!"

The story was publicized. When one of his aides showed him the written version of the story, *Rav Chaim* wept. "I do not remember the incident, but it is possible that it happened," he said. What occupied

Rav Chaim that could divert his attention from everything? In another incident, one of *Rav Chaim's* neighbors, himself an outstanding *talmid chacham*, observed that *Rav Chaim* was just not himself. He appeared distressed and frustrated. Obviously, such feelings can take a toll on a person's health. The neighbor asked the *Rebbetzin* what was bothering *Rav Chaim*; how could he alleviate some of his distress? The *Rebbetzin* replied, "My dear *Rav*... two weeks have passed that *Rav Chaim* has been troubled by a question that he has on the *Rambam, Hilchos Meilah*. If you can give him an answer, all will be *b'seder*."

וַיִּתְשֶׁם ד' מֵעַל אֲדָמָתָם בְּאַף וּבַחֲמָה ... וַיִּשְׁלַכְם אֱלֹהֵי אֶרֶץ אֲחֵרָה
Hashem removed them from upon their soil, with anger, with wrath He cast them to another land. (29:27)

Hashem was angry against the Land, to the point that He was about to bring on it the curses of the Torah. Instead, He removed *Klal Yisrael* from the Land and sent them into exile. *Horav Yosef Nechemiah Kornitzer, zl*, explains that actually being exiled from the Holy Land was to our benefit. Once the decree went out against the Land, it could not be rescinded. Had we been there, we would have suffered immeasurably – if we would even survive. Thus, Hashem's benevolence and compassion shined through and came to the fore as it always does. He exiled us. If we are not there, we cannot be decimated with the Land. Thus, we are still here today. This is like the parable stated in the *Midrash*, concerning a king who became angry with his son for his treasonous behavior. He swore that he would pass a sword over his throat. The king could not go back on his word. However, he was not about to kill his son. What did he do? He placed the sword in its scabbard and then passed it over his son's throat. He kept his word, but, his son was still alive to talk about it.

How often do we forget that everything that occurs in our lives is guided by Hashem for a specific reason? *Gam zu l'tovah*, "This too is for the good" is much more than a positive outlook on life. It should be our only perspective. Everything Hashem does is for a reason, which is often beyond our ability to grasp. Everything Hashem does is good, even though we presently are challenged to uncover that good. We could fill volumes with stories that underscore this idea. I take the liberty of relating a classic.

A Jew does not despair. He has no right to give up hope, because it is not his to give up on. It all comes from Hashem. *Horav Yaakov Galinsky, zl*,

relates how he spent World War II and its aftermath in the frozen tundra of Siberia. Following the Ribentrop/Molotov treaty, Lithuania remained a free state, until the Russians conquered and took it over. The *yeshivah* students, consisting primarily of Yeshivas Novoradok, were rounded up and placed in cattle cars for the ten-day train journey to Siberia. The Russians did not permit the hapless Jews to exit the train to address their basic, personal needs. They were locked in like caged animals for ten days.

They spent fifteen years at hard labor in Siberia. These students were very down; having to leave their Torah studies for slave labor in the coldest place on earth. How envious they were of the students who were able to escape from the clutches of the Russian soldiers; until they discovered that they had fallen into the hands of the Germans who forthwith included them in their final solution. In other words, what they thought was their disaster, was instead their ticket to salvation.

Rav Galinsky relates that when he arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* he was a broken person, all alone in the world, his family having been murdered by the Nazis. He was told to go to speak with the *Chazon Ish*, *zl*, to develop some perspective on the past and engender hope for the future. After pouring out his heart to the saintly *gadol hador*, preeminent leader of the generation, the *Chazon Ish* replied, “Do you have a right to despair? Does the world belong to you? The world belongs to Hashem, and as long as He is the *Baalim*, Owner, of the world, you have no right to give up hope.”

We place our trust in Him with the knowledge that whatever takes place in our lives is orchestrated by the Almighty for a reason. Giving up is not an option, because we are not in charge; we are not in control.

I close with the invigorating words of the holy *Klausenberger Rebbe*, *zl*, who, when asked how, after losing his wife and eleven children, could he go on, replied, “I lost my entire family; I lost everything, but I did not lose Hashem!” This is how we live; this is what engenders within us the courage to move forward. The *Rebbe* survived the purgatory of the concentration camps, adhering to all *mitzvos* including *kashrus*, eating an apple on *Rosh Hashanah* night, lighting candles on *Chanukah* and eating fruit on *Tu b'Shvat*. Never once did he complain to Hashem. Instead, he rebuilt and continued building in America and *Eretz Yisrael*, refusing to give in to despair.

ושבת עד ד' אלקיך ושמעת בקולו

And you will return to Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice. (30:2)

The reason for repentance should be a desire to come closer, to attach oneself to Hashem. This does not mean that *teshuvah*, repentance, spurred on by a desire to be rid of suffering, or to garner Heavenly blessing, is not effective. It certainly is. *Teshuvah* is effective. It is only that one who repents because he loves, achieves greater efficacy than one who repents out of fear. Furthermore, there is a designated time when one's *teshuvah* is most appropriate and hence achieves greater productivity. During the forty-day period from *Rosh Chodesh Elul* through *Yom Kippur*, Hashem waits for us to return to Him. At this time, His “arms” are open and ready to embrace us. *Horav Shimshon Pincus*, *zl*, presents a powerful analogy to underscore the spiritual advantage of the *yemei Elul v'yemei haDin*.

A certain community did not have a *bais ha'knesses*, edifice dedicated solely for the purpose of coming together to *daven*. The members of the community sought every avenue to construct a *shul*. Buildings cost money, and this community did not have money. Not permitting their lack of funds to stand in the way of fulfilling their dream of having their very own *shul*, they decided to purchase a large trailer and transform it into a *shul*. The company that delivered the trailer brought along a hoist that would lift the trailer up into the air and transport it to its designated place. The day arrived; the trailer was hoisted up into the air and one of the *shul's* members guided the massive trailer to its place. While it was up in the air he pushed and pulled, until he had the trailer centered above the place, and it was then lowered to the ground. As soon as its placement was completed, the electricians and carpenters did their work, putting in electricity, air conditioning, bookcases and tables. Finally, the work was completed. Their *shul* was ready for *davening*. How shocked they were when, to their chagrin, they realized that the *shul* had been centered in the wrong direction. East was west. *Mizrach* was *maariv*.

What could they do now? It was impossible to raise the edifice off the ground. A young boy observed their quandary and asked, “I do not understand. Just the other day we saw how one man was able to single-handedly maneuver the trailer in place. Why can we not take a group of strong men, lift the trailer up in the air, and turn it around? The men told him, “Are you

out of your mind? The trailer weighs several tons. We are unable to lift such a building.” “If that is the case, how did that one man complete the task all by himself?” “Fool! Did you not notice that it was held up in the air with a hoist? All he had to do was direct its placement, which was simple as long as the hoist kept it suspended in the air.”

A similar idea may be applied to the forty-day period when *teshuvah* is most accessible. During *Elul* everything is up in the air. Nothing has been decreed, written or sealed. Whatever might be decreed against us can still be changed. Once *Yom Kippur* passes, the “trailer” is down on the ground and most difficult to move.

כי הוא הייך וארך ימיו

For He is your life and the length of your days. (30:20)

Hashem is our life. He sustains and infuses us with life. For this alone we should love Him. To do this, we must study His Torah for its sake. Love means to care only for the subject of one’s love – not for any other reason. One who studies Torah for ulterior motives will not come to love Hashem. We love G-d as a result of our love/study of the Torah. The two go hand in hand. *Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl*, relates a story that he heard from the son of *Horav Shmaryahu Greineman, zl*, who never left the side of the *Chazon Ish, zl*.

The grandfather of the *Chazon Ish’s* grandfather (his great—great grandfather) was the famed *Baal ha Pardes* and *Rav* of Konigsberg. He was a contemporary of the *Gaon, zl, m’Vilna* and often corresponded with him and also with *Horav Yonasan Eibyshutz, zl*. Shortly before his passing, the members of his community asked him, “Who will be your successor? Who will be our *Rav*?” He instructed them to travel to a certain community and speak with its *Rav* concerning assuming the rabbinic leadership of Konigsberg.

They traveled to this city and, after meeting with the *Rav*, offered him the *rabbanus* of Konigsberg. He then asked, “Is there a *yeshivah* in your community?” “But of course, a nice *yeshivah* with students that spend their days and nights learning.” He asked a few more questions before agreeing to accept their offer. He insisted, however, that they remain in the city for *Shabbos* so that he can address his community and offer the proper leave-taking of them. They agreed to spend *Shabbos*.

Friday morning, the *Rav* summoned them to his house and said, “I have changed my mind. I will not be joining your community.” The men were floored. They thought that everything was settled to each one’s satisfaction. “What is wrong?” they asked. “The *Rav* had agreed. Why is his honor changing his mind?”

He explained. “The following morning after I agreed to go with you, I noticed my *Rebbetzin* weeping copious tears. I asked what was wrong. She explained that every week she washes the clothes of the *talmidim*, students, of our *yeshivah*. (In those days it was a strenuous and difficult job, consisting of heating water and scrubbing the clothes in the burning hot water. There were many students in the *yeshivah*. Understandably, she was busy with this every day.) The heads of the community interjected, “We have a group of women whose job it is to wash the students’ clothes. The *Rebbetzin* will not have to trouble herself anymore.”

“You do not seem to understand,” the *Rav* explained. “This is the *Rebbetzin’s* life. With each garment that she washes, dries and smooths out, she partners with the students’ learning. This is her Torah learning. My *Rebbetzin* said, ‘If you take this from me, I have no reason to live. Without my partnering with the students in their Torah learning, what value is there to my life?’

“How can I deprive my *Rebbetzin* of life?”

The *Chazon Ish* would often relate this story, to show the love for Torah evinced by the previous generations.

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

החבר הרב צבי בן החבר ר' משה ז"ל

נפ' ד' תשרי תשע"ג

Mr. Bjorn Bamberger

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from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <ryfrand@torah.org>
to: ravfrand@torah.org
date: Sep 22, 2022, 8:16 PM
subject: Rav Frand - **Approaching the Day of Judgment: Fear - Yes; Hopelessness – No**
Rashi cites a well-known Medrash explaining the juxtaposition of the pasuk “You are all standing here today...” (Devorim 29:9) with the 98 curses in last

week's Parsha. The Medrash says that after hearing all of the curses, the Jewish people turned green and became despondent, asking, "who can withstand all of these curses"? They lost hope. "What is going to be with us?" they asked.

Therefore, in this week's parsha, Moshe tries to appease them. "You are still here after forty years in the wilderness. You angered Hashem many times...including the incidents of the Egel, the Spies, and the complainers, yet He never destroyed you. You are still here..."

However, Moshe's appeasement appears to be self-defeating. The whole purpose of the curses was to put the 'Fear of G-d' in the people. The curses were very effective. The people were scared stiff. Moshe successfully shook them up. But now he seems to be undoing the whole thing. "Don't worry, you got away with so much in the past..." Does this not destroy the whole impact of the Tochacha?

Many commentaries direct us to a very simple truth. There is a vast difference between 'The Fear of G-d' and hopelessness. Being afraid, frightened and nervous about the future can be constructive. But feeling that a situation is hopeless (being meyayesh) is not.

That is what had happened. The Jews gave up hope. They threw in the towel.

The worst thing that anyone can do is to give up hope. This is a lesson that we should all bear in mind as we approach the Yom HaDin (Day of Judgment). The Yom HaDin is nothing to take lightly. It is serious business. If we really honestly understood the Yom HaDin, we would be scared and frightened.

But that is not the same as looking at the situation as hopeless. Hopelessness is not a Jewish characteristic. Never give up hope.

After the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash, "all the gates (which prayers travel through) were closed, except for the Gates of Tears" (Bava Metzia 59a). After the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash, it became much more difficult for our prayers to penetrate the Heavenly Court. But there is one gate that remains open — the Gates of the Tears.

It is said that the Kotzker Rebbe asked: if the Gates of Tears never close, then what is the purpose of the Gates? A gate implies that some get in and some do not. The Kotzker answered that tears of desperation do not get through. When a person cries because he feels that he needs the help of Hashem, when the tears represent the innermost and purest of a person's

thoughts ('the sweat of the soul') those tears have terrific power. But not if they are tears of helplessness and hopelessness — those tears do not get in and that is why the gates are necessary.

In halacha (Jewish law), when an object is stolen, there is a concept of 'yeiush' — giving up hope. When an object is stolen and the former owner gives up hope of ever getting it back and then it is sold to an unsuspecting purchaser, the purchaser may keep it.

The reason for this is that once the victim gives up hope (of getting the object back), his last connection with the object is severed. As long as a person has not given up hope, there remains a thin thread that still connects him to his lost object. It is not totally lost from him.

The same concept exists hashkafically (in Jewish thought). For every plague, there is a cure. Hashem creates the remedy before he creates the plague (Megillah 13b). We somehow need to connect with that remedy.

How do we connect with the remedy when a plague seems to have no end? There is only one tenuous connection between that remedy and us. The connection is hope.

The same hope that connects a person to his lost object connects a person who is experiencing the dire straits of an illness to the potential cure that Hashem can provide. But once a person gives up hope and feels that the situation is futile, he has severed the connection between the cure and the plague.

That is why no matter how desperate and overwhelming a situation may seem, we must never give up hope. The Izbitzer Rebbe once commented that the reason why all Jews are called after the Tribe of Yehudah (Yehudim) is because when Yosef confronted his brothers and planted the incriminating evidence, the brothers gave up hope. Only Yehudah did not give up hope. "And Judah drew near to him..." (Bereishis 44:18). Yehudah never gave up hope. That is the attitude that must typify all Jews.

As frightening as the Yom HaDin should be for every Jew, there is a difference between fright and hopelessness. We need to enter the Yom HaDin sober, afraid, and nervous as if we are entering a court. But we cannot enter the Yom HaDin without the attribute of Yehudah — the attribute of hope.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Nitzavim/Vayeilech is provided below: A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org

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לע"נ

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