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It Is Not in Heaven (לא בשמים היא)

Translated and adapted from

Iyunim Chadashim by Nechama Leibowitz

In our previous studies we dealt with the first ten pesukim of this perek (Nitzavim 30:1–10), whose subject is teshuva, and with the closing six pesukim (30:15–20), whose subject is the choice between life and death. We saw how the Torah uses the words *shuv* and *chayim* in differing senses, giving these themes deep and varied meaning.

This time we turn to the four pesukim that stand between those two sections — brief in wording, but weighty in substance. Like much of what is written in the Torah's closing parshiyos, they sum up great and foundational ideas about the Torah as a whole.

(Nitzavim 30:11) כי המצוה הזאת אשר לא אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלאה היא ממך ולא רחקה היא — For this mitzvah, which I command you today, is not concealed from you, nor is it far off.

(30:12) לא בשמים היא לאמר מי יעלה לנו השמימה ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתה — It is not in heaven, that you should say: who will go up to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?

(30:13) ולא מעבר לים היא לאמר מי יעבר לנו אל עבר הים ויקחה לנו וישמענו — Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say: who will cross the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?
(30:14) כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו — For the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

Two Ways to Read These Pesukim

The commentators disagree over how to read this passage. Is it a continuation of what precedes it — the ten pesukim of our perek that speak entirely of teshuva, so that the words המצוה הזאת, "for this is the mitzvah," refer back to teshuva? Or do these pesukim mean to speak, in summary fashion, of the Torah as a whole?

Ramban's Approach: These Pesukim Continue the Theme of Teshuva

Ramban (30:11) holds the first view: that the passage speaks of teshuva, and that the Torah stresses here that nothing stands in its way — that no one can excuse himself on technical grounds, citing considerations of place or time that supposedly hold him back from returning:

But "this mitzvah" refers to the teshuva already mentioned, as in "and you shall take it to your heart" (30:1) and "and you shall return to Hashem your G-d" (30:2) — a mitzvah He commands us to fulfill. So it continues (30:4): "if your outcasts be in the ends of heaven..." — even at such a distance, you can still return to Hashem and do it, "according to all that I command you today," for the matter is not concealed from you nor far off, but very close to you. And the reason it says "in your mouth and in your heart, to do it" is that a person must confess his sin and the sin of his fathers with his mouth, and his heart must return to Hashem — and they shall accept upon themselves that day to fulfill the Torah for all generations, as it is written, "you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul" (30:2).

Ramban thus links our pasuk (30:11) to pesukim 2 and 4, stressing again and again that teshuva depends on no place, no time, no circumstance, no external condition, and no pressure from foreign nations or foreign cultures — it rests solely on a person's free will to return, and to return completely, out of the depths of his heart, out of a soul's longing to return to its Divine source even from the depths of sin, even after growing distant from Hashem and His Torah through the pull of foreign cultures, customs, and habits of mind. It is within a person's power to break down every barrier erected between himself and his Creator:

— כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו — For the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

Rav Yosef Albo's Approach

Rav Yosef Albo interprets these pesukim in similar fashion, attempting to weave the three sections of the perek into a single unit. He writes in *Sefer HaIkkarim*, Ma'amar 4, Perek 25:

Examining parashas Nitzavim carefully, we find that the verse's statement, "see, I have set before you today... which I command you today, to love Hashem your G-d... to listen to His voice and to cling to Him" (30:15–20), speaks of teshuva, following the flow and connection of the parasha. At the outset it says, "and you shall return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice" (30:2), introducing the topic of teshuva and stating that one must be complete in it so that Hashem will respond in kind. It repeats this at the end: "for you will

return to Hashem your G-d with all your heart and all your soul" (30:10). Afterward it speaks at length in praise of teshuva — of its virtue together with the ease of attaining it: "for this mitzvah... is not concealed... for it is very close to you" (30:11–14) — and all of this, without doubt, speaks of teshuva.

A proof of this is the phrase "in your mouth and your heart, to do it" (30:14), for teshuva depends precisely on confession of the mouth and remorse of the heart. And the verse goes to great length in praising it when it says, "it is not in heaven, nor is it beyond the sea" (30:12–13) — as though to say that the matter would be worth every effort in the world, even ascending to heaven or crossing the sea to attain it, so precious a thing is it... for reason dictates that a sinner should not be forgiven merely on account of his sin, and all the more so that teshuva should not be accepted through words alone, as the prophet says, "take words with you and return to Hashem" (Hoshea 14:3) — were it not for the kindness of Hashem. And so the Torah goes on to warn, "see, I have set before you today life and good... choose life... that you may live" (30:15, 19). Having shown how easily it is attained — "for the matter is very close to you" (30:14) — it is therefore not fitting to be lazy in attaining it, since it is life itself for your soul; and just as one ought not be lazy in the pursuit of life, so too here. This is why "choose life" is juxtaposed to it. And the verse explains that the life attained through this mitzvah is itself the very end the Torah seeks, for it is attained through the mitzvah of which it is said, "to love Hashem your G-d, to listen to His voice, and to cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days" (30:20).

Rav Yosef Albo thus reads **כי המצוה הזאת** as referring to teshuva, supporting his view with **כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו**, since teshuva depends on confession of the mouth and remorse of the heart.

A Third View: These Pesukim Speak of the Torah as a Whole

There is much to appreciate in Rav Yosef Albo's approach, yet it nonetheless seems forced. More compelling is the view of the majority of commentators, who hold that these pesukim speak not of any single, particular mitzvah, but of the mitzvos in general — of the Torah in its entirety.

This is how the Sages of the Gemara already understood it, in *Maseches Eruvin* (54b–55a), in a passage discussing the paths and signs by which Torah is acquired:

Rava said: make fixed times for Torah — set aside regular periods for study, so that your feet not grow lazy about coming to learn. This is what Rabbi Avdimi bar Chama bar Dosa meant in asking: what is the meaning of the verse, "it is not in heaven... nor is it beyond the sea" (30:12–13)? "It is not in heaven" — for were it in heaven, you would have had to go up after it. "Nor is it beyond the sea" — for were it beyond the sea, you would have had to cross over after it. Rashi explains that one must exert oneself, using whatever resourcefulness is needed, so that Torah endures among those who study it — this is Rabbi Avdimi's point in expounding the verse's precise language: had it been in heaven, one would have had to go up after it. Rashi says the same, in brief, on our pasuk (30:12): "had it been in heaven, you would have had to go up to learn it."

A Difficulty, and Its Resolution

Rabbi Avdimi's reading is puzzling, since on its face the pasuk seems to say the very opposite of what he derives from it — a difficulty already raised by Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi (the Re'em):

Although this verse would seem to imply that had it been in heaven, no one could have brought it to you to learn it, he is forced to say that this is not its meaning — rather, that had it been in heaven, you would have had to go up to heaven yourself to learn it.

The simplest answer may be that the Sages derived this from the extended language of השמימה לנו מי יעלה, "who will go up to heaven for us." The pasuk could have said, briefly: לא נפלאה... כי המצוה הזאת... — and the contrast would already have been understood from pasuk 14, which gives the reason: כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך, "for the matter is very close to you, in your mouth." But since it goes on at length — "that you should say, who will go up to heaven for us and take it for us... that you should say, who will cross the sea for us and take it for us" — the Sages derived that even had it been in heaven or beyond the sea, one would have had to go up and reach it.

Two Ways to Understand "Who Will Go Up for Us"

Rabbi Yitzchak Horowitz, in his sefer *Be'er Yitzchak* on Rashi's commentary, shows how these pesukim sustain two different readings:

These verses can be understood in two ways.

(a) That fulfilling this mitzvah required great exertion — even crossing over to acquire knowledge of it from beyond the sea — such that one would need to say, "who will go up to heaven for us?" But now you have no such excuse, for no such exertion is involved: the matter is very close to you.

(b) That fulfilling this mitzvah — even had it truly required knowledge from heaven or from beyond the sea — would have been worth it to you, given its great importance and preciousness, so that you would long and yearn after it, saying "who will go up for us... in order that we go out and attain knowledge of it." How much more so now, when it is so close, is there any need to urge you to cling to it lovingly, "as a belt clings to the loins of a man" (Yirmiyahu 13:11). We are left, then, with two possible readings. It should be noted that under both, these are rhetorical questions — and a rhetorical question can either negate, as in "who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?" (Yeshayahu 40:12) or "shall a man make gods for himself?" (Yirmiyahu 16:20), or express a wish or longing, as in "who will give me water to drink from the well of Beis Lechem?" (Shmuel Bet 23:15).

Although at first glance our pasuk's מי יעלה, "who will go up," seems to follow the first reading, the author of *Be'er Yitzchak* ultimately favors the second, explaining:

As to which of these two readings is true, the reader may decide for himself — but the second is the correct interpretation, and the proof comes from the very subject under discussion: the preciousness of His mitzvos, may He be blessed. The first reading is difficult for another reason too: on that reading, the entire statement contains no new insight — merely an exhortation, not fresh information, for did we not already know that it is not in heaven and not beyond the sea? ...Rather, it is written only to make this mitzvah beloved and not something concealed. On the true, second interpretation, the

statement is sweetened by this very awareness and by the exhortation that flows from it.

On this reading, the pesukim declare the greatness and glory of the Torah, and how greatly we are bidden to cherish it, to long for it, and to pursue it — for had it been in heaven, we would have had to go up to heaven to attain it.

The Weight of Responsibility

Our Sages, for their part, saw in these very pesukim the weight of responsibility placed upon us — for since *לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִיא*, "it is not in heaven," it has been given over to us, and it falls upon us to cherish it and to draw out its conclusions.

This pasuk served as the deciding word in the dispute between Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkanos and the Sages over the laws of the *tanur shel Achnai* (an oven built of separate segments). So the Gemara relates in Maseches Bava Metzia (59b):

On that day Rabbi Eliezer put forth every argument in the world, but the Sages in the study hall did not accept them from him.

He said to them: If the halacha is as I say, let this carob tree prove it! The carob tree was uprooted from its place a hundred amos — some say four hundred amos. They said to him: one does not bring proof from a carob tree.

He said to them again: If the halacha is as I say, let the stream of water prove it! The stream of water turned backward. They said to him: one does not bring proof from a stream of water.

He said to them again: If the halacha is as I say, let the walls of the study hall prove it! The walls leaned as if to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked them: if Torah scholars are debating a matter of halacha, what business is it of yours? The walls did not fall, out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, and did not straighten, out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer — and they remain leaning to this day.

He said to them again: If the halacha is as I say, let it be proven from Heaven! A heavenly voice went forth and said: why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, for the halacha follows him in every place? Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said: "it is not in heaven" (30:12) — we pay no attention to a heavenly voice, for You already wrote at Har Sinai, "one must incline after the majority" (Mishpatim 23:2).

What the Story Teaches

A great lesson emerges from this story. Rabbi Eliezer could not persuade the Sages of Israel through arguments of the intellect — he put forth every argument in the world, and they did not accept them from him — and out of his great confidence in the rightness of his position, and his inner conviction that his words were true, he turned to Hashem, seeking help through signs and wonders from heaven. That, too, was not accepted from him. In the end he sought Hashem's own direct help, as it were, to prove the truth of his words — and that too was not accepted.

It is as though Hashem Himself, in His glory, may not intervene in the determination of halacha, since that determination is no longer His alone to make, but has been given over to us. So the Maharsha (Rabbi Shmuel Eidels), in explaining this passage, puts it with characteristic brevity: *אין משגיחין בבת קול* — we do not pay attention to a heavenly voice — meaning, one may not decide halacha by means of it; one may only engage with it in the ordinary give-and-take of Torah study.

The Rambam's Formulation

Halacha may be decided only by the Torah itself, through its own methods, from within it. When the Rambam stresses the eternity of the Torah against every sort of enticer, from within and from without, he too turns to our pasuk. He writes in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah (9:1, 4):

It is clear and explicit in the Torah that it is a mitzvah standing forever, for all eternity; it has no change, no diminishing, and no addition, as it is said, "every matter that I command you, that shall you observe to do; you shall not add to it, nor take away from it" (Re'eh 13:1), and it is said, "and the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to fulfill all the words of this Torah" (Nitzavim 29:28). From this you learn that we are commanded to fulfill all the words of the Torah forever. And so it says, "an eternal statute for your generations," and it is said, "it is not in heaven" (30:12). From this you learn that no prophet is permitted to innovate anything from now on.

Therefore, if a man should arise — whether from among the nations of the world or from Israel — and perform a sign or a wonder, and say that Hashem has sent him to add a mitzvah or take one away, or to interpret one of the mitzvos in a manner we have not received from Moshe, or says that the mitzvos Israel was commanded are not for all time and all generations but were only for a limited time — he is a false prophet.

So too, if he uproots any matter we have received by tradition, or says regarding a matter of Torah law that he has heard the halacha follows so-and-so's opinion — he is a false prophet... even if he performs a sign, for one may not contradict the Torah, since it says, "it is not in heaven."

A Dual Responsibility

Ramban (and, similarly, Sforno and many others) took our pasuk as proof of how readily attainable the Torah's fulfillment is — that no external factor prevents us from fulfilling it. Yet from another angle, our pasuk also proves the tremendous responsibility placed upon us to study it. For since *לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִיא* — it is not in heaven, but has been given from there to human beings — no further direct instruction or guidance can come from heaven in matters of Torah. The Torah has been given, and it falls upon those who study it to learn it and interpret it, in order to fulfill it.

It is not the inheritance of a select class — of magicians and Brahmins, of priests and sorcerers who guard secrets to which only they and their heirs have a share. It is no longer in the heavens above; it is with us and within us — to study, to teach, and to do. Indeed, our pasuk has already served, in this vein, as the proof-text for the great question of whether, once the Torah was given at Sinai, its determination lies entirely in the hands of the Sages of each generation, to be decided by majority on the strength of intellectual argument alone — or whether one ought to look, in such matters, for decisions of a higher, supra-human character, for a light from above.

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Exploring Themes from the Thirteen Attributes Of Mercy
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Young Israel of Midwood; Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchonon

The drama of repentance and forgiveness that plays out each year and culminates on Yom Kippur is rooted in, and prefigured by, the story of the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe's impassioned prayers on behalf of the Jewish people, and the forgiveness that is finally extended by יהוה on Yom Kippur.

In this essay, I will explore some of the themes that emerge from a close reading of the appearance of the Middos in scripture as well as some important philosophical and theological questions that emerge from some of the commentaries on the Middos.

TEXTUAL SOURCES FOR THE THIRTEEN ATTRIBUTES OF MERCY

At the heart of the order of prayers that the rabbis instituted for this season are the Selichos, whose central refrain: ה'...ה' קל רחום וחנן, the enumeration of G-d's thirteen attributes of mercy, was first said by Moshe on that occasion.

The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 17b) describes that event: ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא, אמר רבי יוחנן: אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומרו, מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור, והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר לו: כל זמן שישראל חוטאין, יעשו לפני כסדר הזה, ואני מוחל להם. ה' ה', אני הוא קודם שיחטא אל רחום וחנן, אמר רב יהודה: האדם, ואני הוא לאחר שיחטא האדם ויעשה תשובה. ברית כרותה לשלש עשרה מדות שאין חזרות ריקם, שנאמר הנה אנכי כרת ברית. And Hashem passed before him and [He] called...; R' Yochanan said, had it not been written, we could not have said it: it teaches that the Holy One Blessed be He wrapped Himself like a shliach tzibur and showed Moshe the order of this prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sins, let them do before me according to this order and I will forgive them. Hashem, Hashem; I am He before man sins and after man sins and repents. A merciful and graceful G-d; R' Yehuda said: There is a covenant regarding these thirteen attributes that they never return empty-handed, as it says: Behold I am making a covenant.

PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS TO PONDER ABOUT THE MIDDOS

This whole passage is fraught with difficulty. First, there is the sense that the *י"ג מידות* represent some extraordinary source of *רחמים* that transcends the ordinary system of *שכר ועונש*. There is even a sense that they transcend the normal process of *תשובה*, that they somehow represent absolution without *תשובה*.

והנותני את אשר אהון, אע"פ שאינו: גמרא (ברכות דף ז) This is explicit in the הגון, ורחמי את אשר ארחם, אע"פ שאינו כדאי And I will have mercy upon those on whom I wish to have mercy, even if they are not fit, and I will be compassionate for those for whom I have compassion, even if they aren't worthy.

This is expressed even more strikingly in the Midrash (ילקוט שצ"ה): באותה שעה הראה לו הקב"ה כל האוצרות של מתן שכר שמתוקנות לצדיקים אמר לפניו רבש"ע האוצר הזה של מי הוא אמר לו של עושי צדקה. וזה של מי של מכלכלי יתומים וכן כל אוצר ואוצר עד שראה אוצר אחד אמר לו זה של מי הוא אמר לו מי שיש לו אני נותן לו משכרו ומי שאין לו אני עושה עמו חנם שנאמר והנחית את אשר... At that time Hashem showed him all the treasures stored up for the righteous. He said to Him: "Master of the Universe, for whom is this treasure?" "It is for those who give charity." "And for whom is this treasure?" "For those who support orphans." And so on with each treasure, until [Moses] saw one [remaining] treasure and asked Him: "For whom is this?" He answered: "To those who have merit, I give

their just reward; but to someone with no merit I give freely, as it says: And I will give grace to whomever I shall give grace." This Midrash is echoed in one of the פיוטים that we read on the first night of סליחות: סליחות חנים מאוצר המנוצר... To give freely from the stored treasure...

All of this is very puzzling, for it would seem to fly in the face of the אמר ר' חנינא כל האומר הקב"ה ותרן יותרו חיייו שנאמר הצור :ב"ק דף in גמרא תמים פעלו כי כל דרכיו משפט. Rav Hanina said: Anyone who says that G-d just overlooks things, his life should be overlooked, for it says: The Rock, whose deeds are perfect, for all His ways are just.

For that matter, what of the concept, which forms one of the Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith, that שכר and עונש, reward and retribution, are meted out strictly according to merit?

WHAT DO THE MIDDOS TELL US ABOUT HOW G-D CONDUCTS THE WORLD?

Another matter that demands attention is the striking image of הקב"ה wrapping himself in a טלית as a שליח ציבור and saying these thirteen מידות. The Gemara itself takes note of how radical this image is and prefaces it by saying: אַלמלא מְקרא חַתּוּב א"א לַאמְרוּ: had it not been written we could not have said it!

Clearly, we are not supposed to take this image literally. So, what is it supposed to convey?

There is a general theological problem which recurs in many forms, but can be stated as follows:

On the one hand, we believe man is free and responsible, that he has free choice and, consequently, is subject to reward and punishment. Taking this thought to its logical conclusion would seem to indicate that ה' הקב"ה's role is entirely reactive. Yet we also believe that ה' הקב"ה is all powerful, and propels history forward according to His deep plan, His עצה עמוקה.

How can we reconcile human freedom and responsibility, on the one hand, with G-d's power to drive history forward, on the other?

To take a specific example: The Zohar says that our exile in Egypt was a punishment for the sale of Joseph. There had to be a sin for the suffering to make sense. But wasn't the enslavement in Egypt necessary to fulfill the promise of the covenant with Abraham in which Hashem already foretold that Abraham's children would be enslaved?

The problem is addressed by the דרך השם in רמח"ל. He answers by distinguishing between two different processes that are continually at work in G-d's Providence. On the one hand, there is the process of reward and retribution, שכר ועונש, in which הקב"ה relates to man in a way that is correlated with man's behavior. The רמח"ל calls this process הנהגת המשפט, the Divine system of justice. Within the framework of that system, Hashem's role is reactive, doling out reward and punishment according to man's merits and demerits. But at the same time, there is a different Divine system at work, which is the unfolding of הקב"ה's plan for the world and, ultimately, the fulfillment of His purpose, which is to bring the world to that point when G-d will be One and His name will be One. The רמח"ל calls this הנהגת הייחוד, the Divine system of unification, which means the process of revealing הקב"ה as the One power at work in the world. Both of these systems are at work simultaneously, with one sometimes overriding the other. In the system of justice, הנהגת המשפט, man is free to do good or evil, to fulfill G-d's will or to flout it, and

he is rewarded and punished accordingly. Yet in the system of unification, His plan unfolds inexorably, and cannot be thwarted by man's actions.

Hence, the question of what caused the enslavement in Egypt can be asked from two different perspectives: From the perspective of הנהגת המשפט, the question is: what did we do to deserve it, in which case the answer connects to מכירת יוסף.

From the perspective of הנהגת היחוד, in which the question is: Why did the enslavement have to happen, in which the answer is related to the Covenant and the actualization of G-d's plan.

This sheds a bright light on the נחומא on the verse "And Joseph was brought down to Egypt": זה שאמר הכתוב: לכו וראו מפעלות אלקים נורא: עליה על בני אדם (תהלים כ"ה). א"ר יהושע בן קרחה אף הנוראות שאתה מביא עלינו בעליה אתה מביא... וכן אומר ויראו אחיו כי אותו אהב אביהם, ע"י לשון של ארגמן שעשה לו כתנת פסים... גרם לכל השבטים לירד למצרים, וא"ר יודן ה' הקב"ה מבקש לקיים גזירה ידוע תדע, והביא עליה לכל דברים אלו כדי שיאהב יעקב את יוסף וישנאו אחיו ומכרוהו לישמעאלים וירידוהו למצרים, וישמע יעקב שיוסף חי ירד עם השבטים וישתעבדו שם... This is as the verse says: Go and see the works of the Almighty, awesome in machinations (עלילה) on the sons of Man. R' Yehoshua Ben Karcha said: Even when it comes to the awesome things that you bring upon us, you bring them about through machinations... As it says: "And [Joseph's] brothers saw that his father loved him"; through a purple fabric which he made for him into a coat of colors... He caused the tribes to descend to Egypt. And R' Yuden said, The Holy One Blessed be He wanted to fulfill the decree [of the Covenant with Abraham], but He brought about a plot for all these things, so that Jacob would love Joseph and the brothers would hate him and sell him to the Ishmaelites and bring him down to Egypt, and Jacob would hear that Joseph lives, would go down with the brothers, and they would be enslaved there... Behold: Awesome in machination. The Theological Question: Egyptian Free Will vs. G-d's Plan for the Jews.

Let us consider a related issue, which is discussed at length by the ראשונים. If the הקב"ה had foretold and decreed the Egyptian slavery, why were the Egyptians punished for fulfilling Hashem's plan? Both the רמב"ם and the רמב"ד address this question. The רמב"ד's answer is that the Egyptians acted out of wicked motives, and were therefore held accountable even though they acted as unwitting agents of the הקב"ה's plan. The רמב"ם answers that even though there was a pre-ordained decree that Egypt would enslave the Jews, it was never decreed that any particular individual Egyptian had to participate in the oppression.

In the light of the רמב"ה's distinction, we can re-phrase these two answers in such a way that we will see that they are really complementary:

The רמב"ד is saying that on the level of המשפט each Egyptian was free to persecute the Jews or not. The fact that on a deeper level they were fulfilling Hashem's plan is irrelevant. Man is judged on the level of הנהגת המשפט, not on the level of הנהגת היחוד.

The רמב"ם tells us why, in fact, man is judged on the level of הנהגת המשפט: Because that is the level on which individual freedom operates. Any individual was free not to persecute the Jews, and Hashem's plan would have been fulfilled by someone else.

If we follow this thought, it emerges that the primary arena of human freedom, and hence of הנהגת המשפט, functions on the level of the individual. But if we enlarge our scale, and consider whole peoples and the whole sweep of history, then human freedom may be constrained by הנהגת היחוד and the necessary unfolding of the הקב"ה's plan for the world.

This is reminiscent of a well-known concept in physics. On the subatomic level, the "quantum" level, there is no determinism, and no way to predict the behavior of any individual subatomic particle. But if we pull back to the larger, macro-atomic level, then the iron hand of the laws of physics takes over.

This gives us a new way to think about the רמב"ה's distinction. הנהגת המשפט operates on the quantum level, on the level of the individual, which is the arena of חפזית. But on the macro-atomic level, the further we move up from the level of the individual, the more the הנהגת היחוד starts to predominate.

The word חטא means "to miss"; as in: השערה ולא יחטיא. Every חטא represents a departure from השם's purpose. But that only makes sense on the "quantum" level, the level of המשפט, where each individual is free. But on the level of הנהגת היחוד there is no such thing as thwarting רצון השם; on that level, חטא cannot thwart His purpose.

What the Middos Tell Us about the Nature of G-d Himself

Let's return to the מידות. They begin with the words: השם השם.

What does this double-expression mean? Says the גמרא: ראש השנה: אני הוא קודם שיחטא ואני הוא לאחר שיחטא. I am He before man sins and I am He after man sins.

אני הוא קודם שיחטא ואני הוא לאחר (ליקוטים סוף משלי): elaborates הר"א. The שיחטא, כמו שנאמר (מלאכי ג') כי אני ה' לא שנית ואתם בני יעקב לא כליתם, ביאורו מפני שאני ה' איני משתנה בין קודם החטא בין לאחר החטא כי לא תשתנה מהד"ר שלי לכן אתם בני יעקב לא כליתם אע"פ שחטאתם ועזבתם אותי. I am He before he sins and I am He after he sins; as it says (Malachi ch. 3) For I Hashem have not changed, and you the sons of Jacob have not perished. The explanation is, that because Hashem is not changed by sin, therefore the attribute of Mercy is not changed by it, and therefore, you the sons of Jacob have not perished even though you sinned and abandoned Me.

That's why מידות חנים, לחוננם חנים. We might ask: We saw that man is judged on the level of המשפט, not of הנהגת היחוד. As we saw in the case of the מצרים: On the level of הנהגת היחוד, they were fulfilling the הקב"ה's own plan; yet they were judged and punished on the level of הנהגת המשפט, for their personal culpability in persecuting the Jews. So how can we as quantum individuals invoke the רחמים of השם, of the מידות?

The answer is that the Egyptians were judged as individuals. and, as we said earlier, no individual is necessary to the הקב"ה's plan. Each individual faces judgment only on the level of המשפט. הנהגת המשפט means that חטא, in the sense of a thwarting of the הקב"ה's will, can never affect השם Himself; moreover, in the largest sense, that of הנהגת היחוד, it is impossible to thwart His will. On that level חטא is impotent.

The הר"א tells us that the רחמים of the מידות flows from this fact. The מידות flow from the level of השם, of הנהגת היחוד, where חטא has no power to damage, and where limitless רחמים is therefore possible.

But when the נביא מלאכי says *אתם בני יעקב לא כליהם*, he speaks of the Jewish people as a whole, *אתם בני יעקב*. And בני יעקב as a people are very much necessary to His plan, because the very essence of the ברית is that we are His agents in history. כלל ישראל is inseparable from היחוד; like it or not, we are bound up with His purpose.

אני הוא קודם שיחטא אני is connected to that level on which I, G-d, am the same before sin and after sin, in which חטא is not and cannot be thwarted by חטא. And that is an inexhaustible source of רחמים.

Therefore, there is no contradiction between the idea of מתנת חיים and the שכר ועונש of עיקר.

The latter relates to the level of the individual, the arena of בחירה, and on that level, we cite the phrase, whoever says G-d overlooks, his life shall be overlooked, וכן ותרן. But the former relates to the level of הנהגת היחוד, the broad sweep of history, and on that level, חטא is powerless to thwart השם; that is the level of השם לא כליהם בני יעקב. משה לא כליהם בני יעקב.

WHY MUST WE RECITE THE MIDDOS ONLY WITH A MINYAN?

It follows that the י"ג מידות של רחמים are bound up with the idea of גמרא. I would suggest that that is what the גמרא is intimating when it describes the חטא as revealed when he revealed these מידות. This is as if to say, these מידות flow from the special eternal connection that binds ישראל with קודש בריך הוא.

Hence the י"ג מידות can only be recited with a ציבור.

And yet, clearly, we invoke the י"ג מידות not only on behalf of the ציבור, but also on behalf of every individual within the ציבור. How? Because כלל ישראל is unique in that each individual is necessary to the drama of מצרים. But every Jew is necessary for כנסת ישראל to fulfill its role; so much so, that חז"ל say that had one Jew been absent, מתן תורה could not have taken place.

That is the mystery of the Jew. He appears to be significant only to himself. But in reality, he is necessary to the totality of ישראל which bulks large in the רבש"ע's plan for history.

But to invoke the רחמים that flows from that, we need to rise to an awareness of that connection, to attach ourselves to כלל ישראל. כמיו we emphasize the י"ג מידות when we invoke the רחמים. The essence of משה רבינו's עונה was his complete dedication to ישראל, to the point of Erase me, of complete self-effacement.

When the הנביא asked the Shunamite woman: *היש לדבר לך אל המלך*, shall I speak for you to the king, she answered *אני יושבת יושבת*, I dwell amongst my people. The Zohar explains that it was ראש השנה, and he was offering to intercede on her behalf before the King of Kings. To which she answered: *לא בשעתא דדינא תליא בעלמא לא יתפרש*. בר נש בלחודי, דהא בזמנא דדינא תליא בעלמא אינון דאשתמודעון ורשימין בלחודייהו אף על גב דזכאין אינון אינון אתפסן בקדמיתא, ועל דא לא לבעי ליה לאיניש לאתפרשא מבין עמא לעלם דבכל זמנא רחמי דקודשא בריך הוא על עמא כלהו כחד, ובגיני כך אמרה בתוך עמי אנכי יושבת ולא בעינא לאתפרשא מנייהו כמה. *But when it is a time of judgment in the world, a man should not separate himself, for at a time of judgment, those who are distinguished as being apart, even if they are meritorious, will be caught up first, and therefore a man should not seek ever to*

separate from the people, for at all times the Holy One Blessed be He's mercy is on His people as one, and therefore she said: I dwell amongst my people, and I do not want now to be separated from them, just as I have not done so in the past.

Hence, the message of the י"ג מידות is that the greatest source of רחמים we can invoke is that which flows from identifying with כלל ישראל. when these מידות are recited. There is no greater source of רחמים than the consciousness that Among my people is where I dwell.

Excerpted and Adapted by CS from **שבת ומועד**

By Rav Yitzchak Kossowsky

One Nation on Earth גוי אחד בארץ – Parshas Vayeilech

Written circa 1947 or 1948

Rav Kossowsky was Rav of Iyve, Volkovisk & Johanusburg הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף וגרך אשר בשעריך למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו - *Gather the people, the men, the women, the children, and your stranger within your gates, so that they may hear and learn, fear Hashem your G-d, and observe all the words of this Torah* (Devarim 31:12)

את ה' האמרת היום להיות לך לאלקים וללכת בדרכיו ולשמר חקיו ומצותיו ומשפטייו - *You have distinguished Hashem today to be your G-d, to walk in His ways and observe His statutes, mitzvos, and laws, and Hashem has distinguished you today to be His treasured people* (Devarim 26:17-18)

And who is like Your people, like Israel, one nation on earth (II Shmuel 7:23)

I. Hakhel and the Meaning of a Single People

Our *parsha* is the shortest *parsha* in the Torah, containing only thirty *pesukim*. Yet within this brief *parsha Moshe Rabbeinu* speaks to all Israel at the close of his life, transfers leadership to Yehoshua, warns of the dangers that will face the nation, commands that the Torah be preserved for the generations, and gives the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*. The brevity of the *parsha* therefore conceals an extraordinary concentration of the great questions concerning the continued existence of Israel after Moshe.

The *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* is especially striking. Once in seven years, after the *shemittah* year, all Israel is to assemble, not merely the scholars and not merely those obligated in *Talmud Torah*, but the men, the women, the children, and the *ger*. The Torah itself gives the purpose: the entire people is to hear, learn, fear Hashem, and guard the Torah. *Hakhel* is therefore not merely a public lesson. It is a manifestation of the nation itself standing together before Hashem and His Torah.

Chazal illuminate this point through the celebrated account of Rabbi Yochanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Elazar ben Chisma, who came to greet Rabbi Yehoshua in Pekiin. Rabbi Yehoshua asked what new teaching had been given in the beis midrash that day. They answered that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah had expounded the *parsha* of *Hakhel*. He taught: הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף אנשים באים ללמוד נשים באות - *Gather the people, the men, the women, and the children. The men come to learn, the women come to hear; why do the children come? In order to give reward to those who bring them* (Chagigah 3a) Rabbi Yehoshua responded: you have just a valuable explanation (a precious pearl) and you

almost withheld it from me! The presence of the children, who cannot yet understand the teaching as adults do, shows that the gathering is *larger* than the intellectual act of study. The child belongs to the assembly because he belongs to Bnai Yisrael. His very presence links the next generation to the same *Torah* and the same people.

The *Gemara* there in Chagigah 3a then records another *derashah* delivered by *Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah* that day, and its placement alongside *Hakhel* is not accidental. It turns from the gathering of Bnai Yisrael to the mutual distinction between *Hashem* and Bnai Yisrael.

On the words האמרת היום וה' האמירך היום - *You have distinguished Hashem today, and Hashem has distinguished you today* (Devarim 26:17-18), Chazal explain: אתם עשיתוני חטיבה אחת בעולם ואני אעשה אתכם חטיבה אחת - *You have made a distinct entity (the one G-d) in the world, and I will make you the a distinct entity (treasured nation) in the world* (Chagigah 3a; Berachos 6a)

Bnai Yisrael makes *Hashem* one distinct entity by proclaiming שמע ישראל ה' - *Hear O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One* (Devarim 6:4). Correspondingly, *Hashem* makes Bnai Yisrael one distinct entity: ומי כעמך כישראל גוי אחד בארץ - *And who is like Your people, like Israel, one nation on earth* (II Shmuel 7:23)

The two teachings complement one another. *Hakhel* gathers every part of Israel into one assembly, and the second *derashah* reveals what that assembly means. Israel is not merely a collection of individuals who happen to share a religion or a history. It is a single chativah, a distinct whole. The many become one without ceasing to be many.

II. What Does Echad Mean?

The word *echad* has more than one use. At times it is numerical: one object rather than two. But when we speak of *Hashem* as One, numerical counting plainly cannot be the point. *Hashem* is not one member of a class. His oneness means that there is no second to Him and that His unity is not composed of parts. The same word, used of Bnai Yisrael as *goy echad*, must therefore be examined more deeply than the bare number one.

If the Torah meant only that Israel is one nation in the numerical sense, there would be no special praise in the expression. France is one nation, England one nation, and every other people may be counted as one people. The praise is that Israel is a chativah achas baolam, a distinct entity in the world, a nation whose identity cannot be duplicated by another nation.

At the same time, *echad* describes an inner unity. A thing may contain many limbs and elements and still be one because all of them belong to one living whole. So too Bnai Yisrael contains tribes, families, generations, scholars and ordinary Jews, men, women, and children, each with a different place and task. *Hakhel* does not abolish these distinctions. It brings them together so that their membership in one people becomes visible.

This also explains why the praise of Bnai Yisrael is attached to the proclamation of *Hashem's* unity. Bnai Yisrael says *Hashem* Echad, and *Hashem* answers by calling Bnai Yisrael *goy echad*. The people that bears witness in history to the One G-d is itself fashioned as a unity. Its existence is bound to that testimony.

Tosafos, in explaining the passage in Chagigah, cites a *Midrash* that speaks of three who testify concerning one another: *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, Israel, and *Shabbos*. *Hashem* and Bnai Yisrael testify that *Shabbos* is the day of rest; Bnai Yisrael and *Shabbos* testify that *Hashem* is One; and *Hashem* and *Shabbos* testify that Bnai Yisrael is one, unique among the nations. On this basis the *Shabbos Minchah tefillah* joins all three ideas.

We say: אתה אחד ושםך אחד ומי כעמך כישראל גוי אחד בארץ - *You are One and Your Name is One, and who is like Your people, like Bnai Yisrael, one nation on earth* (Shabbos Minchah liturgy; Tosafos to Chagigah 3b)

The formula is exact. The oneness of *Hashem*, the sanctity of *Shabbos*, and the oneness of Bnai Yisrael are not three unrelated subjects. *Shabbos* is the sign of the covenant between *Hashem* and Bnai Yisrael, and the covenant itself creates a people whose unity is unlike ordinary political unity.

III. One Nation in the Land

The verse does not stop with *goy echad*. It says *goy echad baaretz*, one nation in the land. The *Zohar* emphasizes the word *baaretz* and teaches that Bnai Yisrael attains the revealed fullness of its oneness in *Eretz Yisrael*. The land is not merely the geographical place in which an already existing people happens to reside. It belongs to the very form in which the unity of Bnai Yisrael is realized.

The *Zohar* says: ודאי בארץ הם גוי אחד עמה אקרון אחד ולא אינון בלחודייהו - *Certainly, in the Land they are one nation; together with it they are called one, and not by themselves alone* (Zohar III 93b)

In *galus* the people are scattered among countries, languages, and civilizations. The eye sees separate communities, separate customs, and separate conditions of life. In *Eretz Yisrael* those scattered parts can again stand together as one public body. The physical gathering of the people corresponds to the spiritual gathering of *Hakhel*.

Yet dispersion does not mean that the inner bond has disappeared. The long centuries of *galus* themselves testify to the opposite. Nations normally disappear when their land, government, and common social framework disappear. Israel remained Israel under radically different conditions because its unity rests on a covenant deeper than ordinary political organization. For that reason the Jew cannot be understood as an isolated individual whose Jewishness is merely one private belief among others. He is a member of a historic and covenantal people. Even where external conditions pull Jews in different directions, the inner connection remains and repeatedly reveals itself in common responsibility and common fate.

Look at the bitter experience of modern Jewish history: Jews who believed that complete assimilation would make them indistinguishable from their surroundings nevertheless discovered, in an hour of persecution, that the world continued to identify them with the Jewish people. What men attempted to dissolve, history itself forced into view again.

The catastrophe that overtook European Jewry gave this truth a terrible form. The persecutor did not inquire into the private philosophy of the Jew, nor did he distinguish between one Jewish camp and another. The attack was directed against the Jewish people as such. The shared suffering cannot itself be the ideal content of Jewish unity, but it demonstrated how false it is to imagine that a Jew can simply cut himself away from the fate of Israel.

The positive side of that same truth is the extraordinary solidarity found among Jews. A Jew hears of the distress of Jews far away and feels that the matter concerns him personally. That response is not merely sentiment. It is the response of one limb of a body to the pain of another limb. The nation is one organism, and therefore the responsibility of one Jew for another follows from the nature of the people itself.

This unity does not remove differences and does not demand sameness. Israel has never been a colorless mass. The twelve tribes were not identical, and the blessings of Yaakov and Moshe assign different qualities and tasks to different tribes. Genuine unity is not achieved by destroying distinctiveness, but by joining distinct parts to one center and one purpose.

That center is the *Torah*. Without it the expression one Jewish people becomes increasingly difficult to explain, for ordinary national bonds are weakened by dispersion and by the passage of generations. The *Torah* accompanied Israel from country to country and made it possible for communities separated by continents to recognize the same covenant, the same sacred history, and the same destiny.

The command of *Hakhel* therefore becomes a model for Jewish unity. Everyone comes, but everyone comes to hear the *Torah*. The unity is not created by ignoring the differences between truth and error or between

fidelity and rebellion. It is created by remembering that all Israel stands before one *Hashem* and has received one *Torah*.

IV. Unity, Teshuvah, and Redemption

The setting of these ideas in Parshas Vayeilech and *Shabbos Shuvah* gives them an additional meaning. Teshuvah is return. For an individual Jew it is a return from sin to *Hashem*, but the return of Israel throughout history is also a return from dispersion to its source, from fragmentation to its unity, and ultimately from *galus* to *Eretz Yisrael*.

Moshe Rabbeinu speaks in Vayeilech with full knowledge that Israel will sin after his death. The *Torah* does not conceal the future rebellion. Yet the same *parsha* commands that the *Torah* be written, taught, preserved, and publicly heard. Sin will occur, but it will not terminate the covenant. The *Torah* will remain the witness through which Israel can return.

The *parsha* says of the song and the *Torah*: *כי לא תשכח מפי זרעו - For it will not be forgotten from the mouth of its descendants* (Devarim 31:21)

This promise is one of the foundations of the hope of *teshuvah*. A Jew may become distant, and a generation may become confused, but the bond has not been erased. What has been forgotten in one place survives in another; what seems extinguished in one generation can reappear in the next. The nation that is one across space is also one across time.

The same principle applies to redemption. The prophets repeatedly describe the future *geulah* not only as rescue from foreign rule, but as the reunification of Israel. Yechezkel is commanded to join the stick of Yehudah and the stick of Yosef until they become one in his hand, and *Hashem* promises:

ועשיתי אתם לגוי אחד בארץ בהרי ישראל ומלך אחד יהיה לכלם למלך ולא יהיו עוד לשני גוים ולא יחצו עוד לשתי ממלכות עוד - *I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and one king will be king over them all; they will no longer be two nations and will no longer be divided into two kingdoms* (Yechezkel 37:22)

The language returns us to the phrase *goy echad baaretz*. The perfection of redemption is not complete while the people remains broken into hostile fragments. Just as the old division of the kingdom embodied national rupture, the prophetic future is one people, in one land, under one sovereignty, serving *Hashem* together.

The work of *Shabbos Shuvah* therefore includes an obligation toward the whole of Israel. A person cannot seek closeness to *Hashem* while cultivating hatred of other Jews. At the same time, unity cannot mean indifference to *Torah*, because the *Torah* is precisely the covenant that makes the Jewish people the singular nation that it is. The task is both fidelity and fraternity. There is a danger on both sides. One can speak of religion while forgetting the people, treating Jews who have become distant as if they were strangers. One can also speak of the people while attempting to detach Jewish nationhood from the *Torah* that formed it. Neither half can provide the full meaning of *goy echad baaretz*. The nation, the *Torah*, and the Land belong to one historical calling.

Accordingly, the call to unity is not a sentimental slogan. It asks every part of Israel to recognize that it is a part and not the whole by itself. The scholar needs the ordinary Jew, the older generation needs the child who is brought to *Hakhel*, communities of different lands need one another, and all need the common center of *Hashem* and His *Torah*.

When Israel lives in that consciousness, the reciprocal words of *Chazal* are fulfilled in their deepest sense. We make *Hashem* a chativah achas baolam by accepting His unity and His *Torah*, and He makes us a chativah achas baolam by sustaining a people that remains one through all the changes of history.

At the Margins of the Essay

The foregoing also helps clarify a question that has become especially pressing in our time: what do we mean when we speak of Israel as a nation? If nationhood is defined only by the ordinary political and social characteristics by which other nations are defined, the historical existence of

Israel in *galus* becomes inexplicable. The Jewish people endured when those ordinary supports were absent.

Nor can the answer be that Israel is only a religious association. A religious association is formed by the present beliefs of its members and can ordinarily be left by changing one's beliefs. Israel did not function in that way. Jews who abandoned observance or even attempted to deny their connection to their people did not thereby create a new ancestry and a new historical identity. The covenantal nation remained the framework into which they were born.

The truth therefore cannot be expressed by severing Jewish religion from Jewish nationhood. The *Torah* did not create a church standing beside a Jewish nation. It created the people Israel as a covenantal people. Its religion is national, and its nationality is permeated by the covenant with *Hashem*. This is why our language constantly moves between *Am Yisrael*, *Toras Yisrael*, and *Eretz Yisrael* without treating them as unrelated compartments. Political rebirth in *Eretz Yisrael* can provide the external vessel for renewed national unity, but the vessel cannot be confused with the whole content. Sovereignty by itself does not explain why this people survived for millennia in order to return. The distinctive content of Israel remains the mission for which it became a people.

On the other hand, those faithful to *Torah* cannot treat the return of multitudes of Jews to *Eretz Yisrael* and their renewed common life as irrelevant to the destiny of Israel merely because the spiritual condition of the generation is imperfect. The prophetic vision itself speaks of gathering, joining, and then purification. The one people must be addressed as one people, with responsibility for every one of its parts.

The tensions of the present are therefore not a reason to despair of unity.

They are a summons to labor for a unity that is neither empty uniformity nor surrender of conviction. Israel must become visibly what it is at its root: one nation bound to one *Hashem*, one *Torah*, and one Land.

Then the ancient words will be heard not merely as praise but as fulfilled reality: ומי כעמך כישראל גוי אחד בארץ - *And who is like Your people, like Israel, one nation on earth* (II Shmuel 7:23)

Rav Schachter on the Parsha

Insights and Commentary Based on the Shiurim of
Rav Hershel Schachter - Adapted by Dr. Allan Weissman
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PARSHAS NITZAVIM

BECHIRAH CHOFSHIS

העידתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וורעך - *I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you - I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring.* (Devarim 30:19)

The *Torah* here formulates the principle of *bechirah chofshis* (free will), a term taken from the words *בחרת בחיים*.

Rav Soloveitchik pointed out that when the Rambam (Hilchos

Teshuvah 5:1-2) writes that the possibility of *teshuvah* is based on the premise that Man was created with *bechirah chofshis*, he uses a noteworthy expression in this regard: *רשות לכל אדם נתונה לו* - "Every man is given the ability [to sin]." Of course, the word *רשות* does not mean "permission," that a person has the right to choose to do aveiros, but rather that he has the ability to choose to do aveiros.

The Rav felt that this phrase has a more inclusive connotation than the expression *bechirah chofshis*. *Bechirah* refers to the option that one has to choose from any one of a number of alternatives that he is presented with, similar to the usage of the word *bechirah* (elections) in Modern Hebrew. In contrast, the implication of *רשות* is that we have the capacity to select a path that is distinctly different from any of the alternatives that we are given.

A child raised in a totally religious environment has the ability to become

totally secular. A young man whose parents present him with numerous options of secular universities to attend may insist of his own accord that he instead attend a yeshiva, an option that was never offered to him. One can choose a different way of life than the ones presented to him, similar to how a prisoner may release himself from prison. The Rambam depicts this stronger form of bechirah chofshis as a fundamental principle of teshuvah. [See MiPninei HaRav, 2001 ed., p. 131.]

This type of decision-making is, in a sense, tantamount to creating something yesh mei'ayin (ex nihilo). The Meshech Chochmah interprets the description of how Adam was created, בצלם אלקים ברא אותו – “in the image of G-d He created him” (Bereishis 1:27), as a reference to the bechirah chofshis that was given to Man. The Torah instructs us, והלכת בדרכיו – “And you shall go in His ways” (Devarim 28:9), and by imitating the ways of Hashem, we preserve the צלם אלקים that was implanted within us. This includes a charge to make original decisions for ourselves; we were given the ability to determine the way in which we lead our lives.

Rav Soloveitchik related that Rav Simcha Zelig Rieger, the Dayan of Brisk, told him that on one occasion, he accompanied Rav Chaim Soloveitchik on a visit to someone's home. While waiting for the host, Rav Chaim glanced at a sefer consisting of a compilation of Chabad chassidus that examined the question of why Hashem created the world (see Tanya, Sha'ar HaYichud V'Ha'Emunah, perakim 4, 7). One suggestion was that it is the nature of a being that is tov (good) to be meitiv (bestow goodness). Hashem therefore created the world to enable Him to shower His kindness upon others. A second explanation was that Hashem desired to be a Melech, and since אין עם מלך בלא עם – “there can be no king without a people,” Hashem needed subjects over whom to rule.

The discussion in the sefer upset Rav Chaim, whereupon he closed the sefer and asserted that it is not proper to discuss what motivated Hashem to do something. Such a discussion suggests that Hashem lacked something – either the ability to act kindly to others or to be known as a melech – and that He created the world to meet that need. In truth, Hashem is completely perfect; it may not be said that Hashem was missing something. Only a human being has needs, and his desire to provide for his needs motivates him to act. Instead, we must say that Hashem created the world purely because it was His ratzon (will) to do so (see Ish HaHalachah, p. 52; Marbitzei Torah U'Mussar 1:136). Divrei Harav, p 249.

Just as nothing forced Hashem to create the world, and He did so out of His pure ratzon, Man, who was created בצלם אלקים, is not pressured into his decisions. Of course, a person may have certain tendencies or predispositions that lead him in one direction or another, and he may take these considerations into account when he makes a choice, but ultimately he is the one who chooses whether he will follow those tendencies or disregard them. Likewise, one's life may be more comfortable if he follows a certain expected course, but again, there is nothing forcing him to make a decision one way or the other. The final decision to do mitzvos or aveiros remains in our own hands. In other words, our צלם אלקים gives us the ability to make decisions in all facets of life that are completely yesh mei'ayin, in the same manner in which Hashem decided to create the world.

Most psychologists in our day do not accept this concept. They believe that every person is born with a mind that is already “preprogrammed” to make certain choices that determine what kind of life he will lead. For example, it has already been decided what sort of person he will marry, which career he will pursue, the type of community he will live in, etc., as if all of his future decisions are “built-in” from the start.

We do not accept this view. The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuvah 5:3) writes that we believe, as one of our ikarei ha'emunah (Principles of Faith), that a person has bechirah chofshis. This is in accordance with the Gemara's principle, הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים – “Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for the fear of Heaven” (Niddah 16b). The Rambam includes under the heading of yir'as Shamayim the totality of human activities in

which one chooses to do mitzvos or aveiros. In fact, exercising one's bechirah chofshis properly in accordance with yiras Shamayim is the only thing worthy of praise, because only such decisions are made solely by us and not by Hashem.

It is obvious that Man's observance of mitzvos is only meaningful if Man has bechirah chofshis. If Man would not have bechirah, there could not be a system of s'char v'onesh (reward and punishment). This explains why the Rambam did not include bechirah chofshis in his thirteen ikarei ha'emunah. He felt it was subsumed under the eleventh ikar of s'char v'onesh – Hashem rewards those who choose to observe His mitzvos and He holds responsible those who choose to violate them.

It emerges from the above discussion that the phrase ובחרת בחיים is not a mitzvah per se, but instead a statement of fact: Man has bechirah chofshis, and he is urged to exercise that bechirah and observe all of the mitzvos ha'Torah. It is therefore interesting to note that the Sefer Chareidim (9:20) counts ובחרת בחיים as one of the taryag mitzvos – the mitzvah of sfeika d'oraisa l'chumrah, that doubtful cases involving Torah law are decided stringently.

Most Rishonim view the halachah of sfeika d'oraisa l'chumrah as a din d'oraisa (Rashba, Toras HaBayis 4:1, s.v. u'mistavra; Ran, Kiddushin, 15b in dapei haRif, s.v. garsinan; Rashi, Kiddushin 73a, s.v. v'iba'is eima). The Rambam (Hilchos Tum'as Meis 9:12), however, maintains that this halachah is a din derabbanan (see Shev Shmaita 1:1-5). According to the Rambam, on a level of d'oraisa, a safek with regard to any issur is permissible; the Torah forbade only definite prohibitions, not questionable ones.

The Mesillas Yesharim (perek 11) writes that logic dictates that sfeika d'oraisa should be l'chumrah mid'oraisa. He assumes that forbidden food is poison to the heart and soul. Accordingly, which intelligent person would allow himself to eat food about whose permissibility there is some question? In this view, issurei Torah are considered issurei cheftza (prohibitions that take effect on objects); that is, there are properties of issur contained within a forbidden item that have a negative effect upon one's neshamah.

The Rambam, in contrast, apparently views issurei Torah as issurei gavva (prohibitions that take effect on people), and he maintains that the Torah adjures a person to abstain only from a definite issur. Even if a questionably prohibited food was later discovered to be assur, since the person was not aware of that when he consumed it, he did not act inappropriately (mid'oraisa).

The question of whether issurei Torah are issurei cheftza or issurei gavva seems to be the subject of a machlokes Rishonim. Accordingly, the Mechaber (Yoreh De'ah 215:5-6) cites two opinions with regard to whether a neder takes effect upon something that is already prohibited by the Torah. If issurei Torah are classified as issurei gavva, there is a new dimension of issur added by means of the neder, since a neder creates an issur cheftza on an object (Nedarim 2b), and this element was not present earlier. However, if issurei Torah are viewed as issurei cheftza (which always places a prohibition on the gavva as well), a status of issur cheftza was present on the prohibited item even before the neder was made. Therefore, a neder cannot be made

on a prohibited item, since אין איסור חל על איסור – “a prohibition cannot take effect upon a similar preexisting prohibition.”

If we do not accept the mashal of the Mesillas Yesharim comparing issurim to poison, and instead consider issurei Torah as issurei gavva, there must be a different rationale that forms the basis of the opinion that sfeika d'oraisa is l'chumrah mid'oraisa. Rav Shimon Shkop (Sha'arei Yosher, Sha'ar HaSefeikos, perek 8) suggests the following explanation. The other Rishonim agree with the Rambam that the Torah's concept of issur neveilah, for example, is limited to something that is definitely neveilah. A safek neveilah is not forbidden due to the issur of neveilah per se; as far as the issur of neveilah is concerned, one would not be adjured to abstain from it.

Instead, Rav Shimon explains, the halachah of sfeika d'oraisa l'chumrah is a new, independent issur d'oraisa that is derived from s'vara (logic): The Torah expects that we abstain from a safek issur as from an issur vadai.

Accordingly, even if the questionably prohibited food turns out to be permissible, one who ate it when it was questionable violated this independent issur. If the food turns out to be neveilah, he violated two different issurim – the command to avoid a safek issur, as well as the issur neveilah. Rav Shimon's approach is thus analogous to the way the Sefer Chareidim understands בחיים, as positing an independent mitzvah d'oraisa to act stringently whenever one is faced with a doubt regarding an issur.

The Rashba and the Ran present a challenge to the Rambam's position that sfeika d'oraisa is l'chumra only miderabbanan from the institution of Asham Taluy. One offers this korban when he is uncertain whether he violated an aveirah that would require a Chatas had he been certain that he violated the aveirah unintentionally. If a sfeika d'oraisa is really l'kula mid'oraisa, as the Rambam maintains, one is actually permitted (mid'oraisa) to partake of a questionable issur, and there should be no need for him to offer an Asham Taluy for atonement!

The Acharonim (see Pri Megadim, Shoshanas Ha'Amakim, end of klal 11, and Mishbetzos Zahav, Orach Chaim 439:1; Pnei Yehoshua, Pesachim 9b, s.v. u'b'Tosfos) explain that the Rambam should be understood in light of his ruling in Hilchos Shegagos (8:2) that one offers an Asham Taluy only in a case in which ikva issura (the presence of a prohibited object has definitely been established) – namely, when one ate “one piece out of two pieces.” For example, one had before him two pieces of fat, one of which was definitely cheilev (prohibited fat) and the other shuman (permissible fat). If he inadvertently ate one of the pieces without knowing which piece he ate, he is obligated to bring an Asham Taluy. If, however, he had before him only one piece of fat, and it is not known whether the piece was cheilev or shuman, he does not bring an Asham Taluy if he ate the piece (Kereisos 17b).

Had the Rambam ruled that Asham Taluy is offered in every case of safek, he would necessarily have to maintain that sfeika d'oraisa is l'chumrah mid'oraisa. However, since the Rambam restricts the institution of Asham Taluy to an ikva issura type of safek, he is free to adopt the position that in a standard safek, a case of “a single piece of fat,” sfeika d'oraisa is l'kulah mid'oraisa. In a case of ikva issura, however, since this is a more stringent form of safek, the Rambam would agree that sfeika d'oraisa would be l'chumrah mid'oraisa.

Translated and adapted by CS from

דינה של תשובה ודרכה The Law of Teshuva and Its Path

By Rav Yehudah Leib Kagan zt"l

Rav Yehuda Leib Kagan (1894–1972) served in the rabbinate in Poland, led the rabbinical court in Belgium, and headed an Orthodox congregation in France. He later immigrated to New York, becoming a prominent Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yaakov Yosef (RJJ), Lower East Side and wrote the recently republished (and expanded) *Halichos Yehudah* on Chumash <https://tinyurl.com/vc5eq7k6>.

Originally printed in the monthly Talpote, New York, Tishrei 5714 (1953) והיה כי יבאו עליך כל הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה אשר נתתי לפניך והשבת אל לבבך בכל הגוים אשר הדיחך ה' אלהיך שמה ושבת עד ה' אלהיך ושמעת בקולו ככל אשר אנכי מצוך היום *And it will be, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse... and you will return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul* (Devarim 30:1–2)

To our deep sorrow, we lack the strength even to speak. We do not have the words to express the terrible pain and continuing tragedy of our nation. We cannot begin to recount all that has befallen us. The scroll written in blood and fire is enough to make one's hair stand on end.

A year passes and another begins, and once again we stand at the threshold between them, in these days of accounting, judgment, and teshuva. Yet this year, beyond the personal cheshbon hanefesh demanded of every individual, we carry a sacred obligation to make a broader *cheshbono shel olam*, an accounting of the state of the Jewish world.

It is a long, bitter, and terrible reckoning, without parallel in our history. If only there were among us one of the prophets of old, capable of giving voice to the suffering of our generation. If we could count not merely the tears of the oppressed, but the countless korbanos who were delivered to the sword and abandoned as prey to the wild beasts of the forest, we would have to add another scroll of mourning, darker than all the scrolls of tears that preceded it.

Yet this is a hidden scroll. Who can weigh it? Who can count it? Who can number and lift up the heads of those of Yisrael who ascended heavenward in a storm, al kiddush Hashem? Their number exceeds twice the number of those who left Mitzrayim. Who can measure the rivers of blood that were spilled during the past year, reddening the lands of the exile across the sea like the flames of the Beis HaMokeid?

Personal Soul Searching

But if the accounting of the world is beyond our control, and we are in no position to demand explanations for the ways of Heaven, we can at least turn inward and examine our own path.

We travel along a crooked road and sink ever more deeply into it. At least once a year, we must engage in an honest cheshbon hanefesh, refusing to avert our eyes or blur the truth about our own small world.

Teshuva stands first among the three things that avert a severe decree. A Jew who lives as part of the community fulfills, at least to some degree, the other two, Tefillah and tzedakah. When a person gives something to a poor person, the mitzvah of tzedakah is in his hand, even if he has not performed it on its highest level. So too with Tefillah. If a person turns to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and asks Him for his needs, even in his own language, then even if he has not fulfilled every aspect of the complete obligation of Tefillah, he has at least fulfilled its basic framework, and according to the Rambam, the daily Torah obligation to pray.

But how do we fulfill the mitzvah of teshuva, the first and most essential condition for averting a harsh decree?

Surely, we all desire with all our strength to annul the harsh decrees that descend upon us day after day, the latest causing us almost to forget the one that preceded it, as one decree follows another. Yet teshuva is not only a matter of extraordinary spiritual power. It is one of the halachos of the Torah, one of the taryag mitzvos, and, in particular, an indispensable requirement of Yom Kippur.

Just as one must eat matzah on Pesach and dwell in a sukkah on Sukkos, so too teshuva is an absolute requirement of Yom Kippur. Without it, one has failed to fulfill the essential obligation of the day. Although we recite a fixed bracha concerning teshuva three times each day, Yom Kippur is different. On Yom Kippur, teshuva is not simply desirable or praiseworthy. It is indispensable to the very mitzvah of the day.

We must therefore not imagine that merely wrapping ourselves in a white kittel and tallis, striking our chests, and reciting the words of vidui is enough to fulfill the law of teshuva. That is not teshuva itself.

With many other mitzvos, even when they are performed in the manner described by the Navi, ותהי יראתם אותי מצות אנשים מלומדה - *their fear toward Me has become a commandment of men learned by rote* (Yeshayahu 29:13), there nevertheless remains some validity to the act itself even when the proper inner intent is lacking. The mitzvah may be performed on a much lower level, almost mechanically, as though the act itself were without life, yet it can still retain at least the outward form, the shadow, of a mitzvah. This accords with the halachic principle of *mitzvos einan tzrichos kavanah*, that mitzvos do not necessarily require intent.

There is an even lower category, that of *mitasek*, when an act occurs without full awareness or deliberate intention. Chazal could speak of giving credit to one who bows during Modim even though he did not fully realize what he was doing. An act performed at such a level may still retain some residue and value as a mitzvah. Thus, according to the view that mitzvos do not require kavanah, even one who blows a shofar merely for the sake of making music may nevertheless fulfill the mitzvah.

But there are other mitzvos that do not belong to the realm of physical action at all. Their fulfillment cannot even be inferred from outward conduct. These are mitzvos whose entire existence lies within the inner recesses of the soul, the *chovos halevavos*, the duties of the heart.

Such mitzvos cannot be fulfilled through external actions alone. When the inner experience is absent, when nothing emerges from the depths of the soul, not even the faintest echo of the mitzvah remains. There must be an inner awakening, a genuine movement within the heart.

Teshuva is one of these mitzvos.

Rav Yisrael Salanter illustrated the nature of such mitzvos through the example of bittul chametz. A person may clean, kasher, scour, scrub, and wash with extraordinary diligence, as meticulously as the most careful household before Pesach. Yet if he fails to nullify the chametz in his heart and mind, all that exertion cannot accomplish the bittul that the halacha requires, and the prohibition of bal yimatzei remains.

So too with Yom Kippur. A person may observe all five afflictions and follow every custom of the day, yet if he has not turned his heart toward regret for the past and genuine resolution for the future, he has not fulfilled the law of teshuva. The halacha is clear: the essence of the day brings atonement only to those who repent.

We must therefore learn how to fulfill this obligation at least in its minimum measure. If we simply follow the familiar external pattern of this great and holy day, we may undergo all its afflictions and yet fail to attain its essential purpose.

I once heard from the Chofetz Chaim who asked: Why do people say that teshuva is so difficult? Regret what you have done in the past, accept upon yourself not to repeat it in the future, say vidui, and you have done teshuva. For a holy man such as the Chofetz Chaim, teshuva could indeed be stated so simply. But we ordinary people must admit that we need to study teshuva and labor to discover its path.

The Essence of Teshuva

Throughout the year we are obligated to observe all the mitzvos of the Torah, and certainly during the days of Elul. Rav Yisrael Salanter was known to say that the entire year should resemble Elul, but Elul must never be allowed to resemble the rest of the year.

As Yom Kippur approaches, however, merely accumulating additional merits is not enough. The essence of these days is teshuva itself, and we are absolutely obligated to do teshuva.

Rav Yitzchak Blazer writes similarly in *Ohr Yisrael*: during the Aseres Yemei Teshuva, simply increasing one's merits does not suffice. Everything depends specifically upon teshuva. This is consistent with the Rambam's ruling that the judgment of the beinonim remains suspended until Yom Kippur, and if they do teshuva, they are sealed for life. The Rambam does not say that they are sealed for life merely by accumulating additional good deeds. The decisive factor is teshuva.

What, then, is the practical framework of teshuva?

It would appear that in order to fulfill the obligation of the day, every Jew should choose at least one particular halacha or mitzvah in which to make a genuine change. One who can undertake more is certainly praiseworthy. It may be a Torah mitzvah, a rabbinic obligation, or even an established proper practice.

He should regret his failures in that particular matter and wholeheartedly resolve not to return to the same folly. By recognizing what was wrong,

abandoning that improper path, and committing himself to something better, he fulfills the law of teshuva.

A person who truly resolves to correct his conduct even in one area has entered the world of teshuva.

After a person stumbles and sins, whether in a great matter or a small one, he would be lost from both worlds were it not for the foundation of teshuva.

There would be no remedy for the sinner who has distanced himself from his Creator except to return to Him.

Chazal express this in striking terms: נפש החוטאת מה תהא עליה ענתה חכמה תמות - *What shall become of the soul that sins? Wisdom answered, let it die* (Yalkut Shimoni 702).

At first glance, we might therefore assume that the entire purpose of teshuva is to repair the damage caused by sin. But that is only partly true.

Chazal teach that teshuva was one of the seven things created before the creation of the world, ואלו הן: תורה, ותשובה, ובעה דברים נבראו קודם שנברא העולם, וכסא הכבוד, ובית המקדש, ושמו של משיח (Pesachim 54a; Nedarim 39b). Regarding some of the other things on that list, such as the Torah, this is readily understandable. Hakadosh Baruch Hu looked into the Torah and created the world.

But why should teshuva itself be described as a creation? Is it not simply one mitzvah among all the other mitzvos? Moreover, if the Torah itself, which already includes the mitzvah of teshuva, preceded the world, why was teshuva singled out and counted separately?

The Path Created Before the World

The answer is that what was created before the world was not merely the mitzvah of teshuva, but the *derech hateshuva*, the path of teshuva.

We are accustomed to thinking of teshuva simply as the remedy for sin. A person sins, and teshuva repairs what has gone wrong. As we have seen, however, this understanding is only partial.

There are many paths through which a person may come close to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, and closeness to Him is the ultimate purpose of man, the choicest of all creation. There is the path of the intellect, the path of the heart, and other paths in avodas Hashem.

But among them there is a particular path that leads a person toward his ultimate, hoped-for, and longed-for destination. That is *derech hateshuva*, the path of return.

From the moment of his birth, by his very physical nature, man tends to move away from his source and from his true place in the world. He must therefore return to his purpose and return to his root.

Teshuva is consequently not merely a remedy that becomes necessary after a person sins, as though a person who had never sinned would have no need for teshuva. Even apart from particular sins, man needs teshuva.

This is *derech hateshuva*, the path of return, and it is this that Chazal counted among the seven things created before the world. It stands alongside the Torah itself, for the Torah too is ultimately a path upon which a person travels toward his proper place and his source.

I learned this explanation from our great master, the genius of mussar of the Mir Yeshiva. See the essay *Toras HaTeshuva in Daas Torah* by the Mashgiach, Rav Yerucham Levovitz zt"l, Devarim, vol. 2, pp. 168–173. Rav Yerucham explained, in this spirit, the structure of Rabbeinu Yonah's *Shaarei Teshuva*. One might wonder why Rabbeinu Yonah discusses throughout the sefer so many of the taryag mitzvos. He includes such seemingly unrelated matters as shaatnez, tzitzis, yibum, and many others. What do all these have to do with the gates of teshuva?

The answer is that there is a law of teshuva even before a person sins, entirely apart from the need to repair any particular aveirah.

This is the path of teshuva.

By his physical nature, man gradually turns his back upon Hakadosh Baruch Hu and upon the observance of His mitzvos. Through teshuva, he turns around once again and faces Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

That is the meaning of the very word *teshuva*: return.

Teshuva is the path by which a person returns to his root. Through that return he comes to observe the mitzvos and guard himself against all the prohibitions of the Torah. Teshuva is therefore not merely the medicine that cures the sickness of sin. It is itself a paved road that leads a person toward fulfilling the will of Hashem and protects him from sin in the first place. In this sense, teshuva resembles Torah itself. This is why Chazal teach that both preceded the creation of the world.

During the days of teshuva, when Hashem is especially near and accessible to us, all of our avodah must therefore be directed along this path.

Torah study, spiritual elevation, refinement of the soul, purification of thought, and the fulfillment of mitzvos can throughout the year be approached through many different paths: the path of wisdom, the path of upright character, the path of truth, and others. But during these days, the days of teshuva and judgment, we are called upon to pursue them specifically through *derech hateshuva*.

This is also the meaning of the plea established in Shemoneh Esrei, והחזירנו בתשובה - *return us through teshuva*.

Our goal is not to remain standing with our backs toward the Sanctuary. We seek to turn around and once again stand face to face with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, in the manner of פנים בפנים דיבר - *face to face He spoke* (Devarim 5:4).

We therefore pray and plead with Hashem to return us to the path of teshuva, the clearest, shortest, and most direct road toward serving Him.

from: Rabbi YY Jacobson <rabbiyy@theyeshiva.net>

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Rabbi YY Jacobson

Forget the Rabbi The Cantor, the Lion & the Fox The Last Wish

On Rosh Hashanah night, the Kazaks captured the rabbi, the cantor, and the president of the synagogue, and granted them a final wish before they would be put to death. The Rabbi: All year round I prepare for my Rosh Hashanah sermon. You can't kill me before you let me present this sermon and get it out of my system. "OK," proclaimed the Kazaks. "We well allow you to give the sermon." They turned to the cantor. "How about you? What is your final wish?" "For 364 days a year, I prepare for my cantorial presentation on the High Holidays. For this year I composed many new brilliant and extraordinary compositions. You have to let me sing them before you kill me." "Granted," said the Kazaks. "And you," they said, turning to the president, "what is your final wish?" "Kill me first," he said.

Sermons and Melodies

It's been a longstanding tradition among Jewish communities the world over to employ cantors for the High Holiday services, often accompanied by choirs, to entertain, engage, and inspire the multitudes of crowds flocking to synagogues during the three days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In many a congregation, the cantor embodies the primary focus of the High Holiday experience. As in a concert or opera, the cantor's choice of melodies, his cantorial skills, and manipulation of sounds and pitches constitute the zenith of the services. Especially if the musical presentation is coupled with a rabbi who knows how to tell a good joke or bring a tear to the eye, it is a hands-down success story. "Spit not in the well from which you drink," suggests the Talmud. I should be the last one to find fault with this phenomenon, since I, too, serve as a pontificator. Yet a moving thought from the great master the Baal Shem Tov concerning this "cantor" and "rabbi" phenomenon may be worthwhile for all synagogues and all of us to reflect upon.

An Angry Lion

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement and one of the most revolutionary thinkers and healers in the history of the world (1698-1760), once shared the following allegorical story (based on a story in the Midrash). Once upon a time, says the Baal Shem Tov, the lion grew furious with all of the other jungle animals. Since the lion is "the king of animal life," and is most powerful and dominant, his ire evoked deep fright in the

hearts of the other animals. "What should we do?" murmured all the animals at an emergency meeting. "If the lion lets out his anger, we are all done." "No worries," came the voice of the fox, known as the wildest of animals. "In the reservoirs of my brain are stored 300 stories, anecdotes, and vignettes. When I present them to the lion, his mood will be transformed." A wave of joy rushed through all the animals as they embarked on a march toward the lion's home in the jungle, where the fox would placate him and restore the friendly relationship between the lion and his subjects.

The Fox Forgets

During the journey through the jungle pathways, the fox suddenly turns to one of his animal friends and says, "You know, I forgot 100 of my entertaining stories." Rumors of the fox's lapse of memory spread immediately. Many animals were overtaken by profound trepidation, but soon came the calming voice of Mr. Bear. "No worries," he said. "Two hundred vignettes of a brilliant fox are more than enough to get that arrogant lion rolling in laughter and delight. "They will suffice to do the job," agreed Mr. Wolf. A little while later, as the extraordinarily large entourage of animals was nearing the lion, Mr. Fox suddenly turned to another colleague. "I have forgotten another 100 of my anecdotes," lamented the fox. "They simply slipped my mind." The animals' fear became stronger, but soon enough came the reassuring voice of Mr. Deer. "No worries," he proclaimed, "One hundred fox stories will suffice to capture the imagination of our simple king." "Yes, 100 jokes will assuage the lion," agreed Mr. Tiger. A few moments later, all of the hundreds of thousands of animals were at the lion's den. The lion rose to his full might and glory, casting a fierce gaze at all of his subjects, sending a shiver through their veins.

The Moment of Encounter - As the moment of truth arrived, all of the animals looked up with beseeching eyes to their bright representative the fox, to approach the lion and accomplish the great mission of reconciliation. At that very moment, the fox turned to the animals and said, "I am sorry, but I forgot my last 100 stories. I have nothing left to say to the king." The animals went into hysteria. "You are a vicious liar," cried they cried. "You deceived us completely. What are we to do now?" "My job," responded the fox calmly, "was to persuade you to take the journey from your own nests to the lion's den. I have accomplished my mission. You are here. Now, let each and every single one of you discover his own voice and rehabilitate his own personal relationship with the king."

Lacking a Personal Relationship

This story, concluded the Baal Shem Tov, illustrates a common problem in institutionalized religion. We come to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, or any other time of the year, and we rely on the "foxes" -- the cantors and the rabbis -- to serve as our representative to the King of Kings. "The rabbi's sermon today was unbelievable," we often proclaim after services. "He is awesome." Or, "That cantor? His vibrato just melted my soul." These clergy all too often become the "foxes" who know how to get the job done for us. Yet, sooner or later, we come to realize that the foxes, with all due respect, don't really have what it takes to address the king on behalf of you and me. Each of us must discover his or her own inner voice and inner passion and spirit, and speak to G-d with a distinct and unique. Cantors and rabbis during the High Holidays (and the rest of the year) ought to view themselves as the Baal Shem Tov's foxes: Their function is to persuade and inspire people to leave their self-contained domains and embark on a journey toward something far deeper and more real. But each and every one of us must ultimately enter the space of G-d alone.

So this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, don't rely on any foxes. Speak to G-d directly. With your own words, with your own soul. Heart to heart, from your truest place to His truest place.

Shanah Tovah!