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from: Rabbi Sacks <info@rabbisacks.org>
date: Jul 29, 2020, 12:37 PM
subject: The Infinite Game (Va'etchanan 5780)
The Infinite Game (Va'etchanan 5780)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The popular author and TED lecturer Simon Sinek recently published a book entitled *The Infinite Game*. [1] Based on the distinction first articulated by James P. Carse, [2] it is about the difference between two types of enterprise. One, a finite game, has a starting and ending point. It obeys rules, recognises boundaries, and has winners and losers. Most sports are like this. So, often, is politics: there are campaigns, elections, rules and regulations, successful and defeated candidates. Businesses can be run this way, when they focus on quarterly profits, share price, market share and the like.

But there are also infinite games. These have no starting point or finishing line, no clear winners and losers, no agreed rules or boundaries. Art is like this. So are music and literature. Beethoven didn't win. Bach didn't lose. Great artists change the rules. That is what Beethoven, Schoenberg and Stravinsky did; so too did Van Gogh, Cézanne and Picasso. Politics can be like this when it rises above opinion polls and sets its vision on larger issues of justice, equality and the moral health of society. Education is a finite game when it focuses on exam results and qualifications, or it can be an infinite game when it is about breadth and depth of understanding and character development.

Finite games are played to win. Infinite games are played for their own sake. Finite games are usually performed in front of an audience of some kind. Infinite games are participative. We engage in them because we are changed by them. Van Gogh did not need to sell paintings to regard art as

worthwhile. Beethoven was not seeking popularity when he wrote his late sonatas and quartets. James Joyce was not aiming at a bestseller when he wrote *Ulysses*.

Infinite games are not a means to an end: winning the championship, beating the market, victory in an election. Instead they are what psychologists call autotelic, that is, they contain their purpose within themselves. We do them because the activity is inherently creative, demanding, uplifting and ennobling.

It should be clear by now that these are not simply two types of game. They are two different ways of playing a game. If, in any country at any time, politics is treated as a finite game in which all that matters are popularity ratings and election results, then it quickly becomes superficial, trivial, uninspiring. The quality of leadership declines. The public becomes cynical and disillusioned. Trust is eroded and the social bond becomes frayed. When politics is lifted by a sense of history and destiny on the part its leaders, when it becomes not the pursuit of power but a form of service-to-others and social responsibility, when it is driven by high ideals and ethical aspiration, then leadership becomes statesmanship and politics itself a noble calling. This is not to denigrate finite games. We need them, because in many spheres of life we need rules, boundaries and time limits. But we must also have space for infinite games because they are among the highest expressions of the human spirit.

These reflections are prompted by two verses in today's parsha:

Be sure to keep the commandments, decrees, and laws that the Lord your God has enjoined upon you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord... (Deut. 6:17-18)

The problem here is that the first verse seems to cover all 613 of the Torah's mitzvot. They are commandments, decrees or laws. Why then does the Torah add, "Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord"? Surely doing what is right and good is no more and no less than keeping God's commands, decrees and laws. Are these not two ways of saying the same thing?

However, as the Talmud [3] explains: "And you shall do that which is right and good in the eyes of the Lord" means that one should not perform an action that is not right and good, even if they are legally entitled to do so. This is the basis of an important law in Judaism, *dina debar metzra*, "the law of the adjoining property." When a landowner comes to sell a tract of land, the owner of the adjacent land has the right to buy it. If it is sold to someone else, the buyer must return the land to the neighbour who then reimburses them for the price they paid for it.

This law is not about land ownership as such. In general, a landowner has the right to sell to whomever they choose. It is about doing "the right and the good" – what people sometimes call *menschlichkeit*. To the neighbour, the purchase of the land is an immense good. They can expand without dissipating their landholdings in different locations. To the outsider, losing this purchase is not a significant loss because they can acquire other fields elsewhere. The law of *bar metzra* departs from the usual principles of law in order to achieve a moral end: helping one's neighbour.

Rashi, basing himself on this Talmudic passage, says that doing the right and good in the eyes of the Lord means "compromise, acting beyond the strict demands of the law." [4] Ramban agrees with this but goes on to make a fascinating and fundamental point:

And the intention of this is that from the beginning God said to keep God's commandments, testimonies, and laws as God has commanded them. And now, it says: even regarding what God did not command, pay attention to do what is good and right in God's eyes, because God loves goodness and righteousness. This is important because it is impossible to mention in the Torah all the details of people's behaviour with neighbours and friends, or business conduct or local ordinances. The Torah mentions many such laws, such as: "Do not gossip", "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge", "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbour", "You shall not insult the deaf", "You shall rise before the aged", and so on. Now it states

generally that one should do what is good and right regarding everything, including compromise and acting beyond the strict demands of the law.[5] Ramban seems to be concurring with Rashi, but actually he is making a somewhat different point. Rashi is saying: keep the law and go beyond it. Ramban is saying that there are some things that cannot be specified by law: “because it is impossible to mention in the Torah all the details of people’s behaviour.” The Torah gives us specific examples: don’t gossip, don’t take revenge and so on. But the rest depends on the situation, the circumstances, and the person or people you are dealing with.

In the terms we encountered at the beginning of this essay: not all the Torah is a finite game. Much of it is. There are rules, commands, decrees and laws. There is the halachah. There are boundaries: milk, meat, public domain, private domain. There are beginnings and endings: the earliest time to say the morning Shema and the latest time. There are successes and defeats: either one does or doesn’t complete the counting of the Omer. All of this is finite even though it is dedicated to the One-who-is-Infinite.

Ramban’s point however (made also by the Maggid Mishneh[6]) is that there are significant areas of the moral life that cannot be reduced to rules. That is because rules deal in generalities, and human lives are particular. We are all different. So is every situation in which we find ourselves. Good people know when to speak, when to be silent, when to praise, when to challenge. They hear the unspoken word, sense the concealed pain, focus on the other person rather than on themselves, and are guided by a deeply internalised moral sense that leads them instinctively away from anything less than the right and the good. The “right and the good in the sight of the Lord” is about the part of the moral life that is an infinite game.

There is a fine account of such a person in Psalm 15: “One whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart... who does no wrong to a neighbour, and casts no slur on others;... who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind... Whoever does these things will never be shaken.”

I believe that we make a fundamental error when we think that all we need to know and keep are the rules governing interactions between us and our fellows. The rules are essential but also incomplete. We need to develop a conscience that does not permit us to wrong, harm or hurt someone even if the rules permit us to do so.[7] The moral life is an infinite game which cannot be reduced to rules. We need to learn and internalise a sense of “the right and the good.”

Shabbat Shalom

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RIETS Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series

The Mastery of Submission

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS; Rabbi, Congregation Beth Abraham, Bergenfield, NJ
Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, in his inaugural address as the new president of Yeshiva University, placed “Toras Emes” - the Torah of Truth - as the unparalleled pillar of the Yeshiva University enterprise I am honored to be asked to describe this principle as part of our celebration of the appointment of President Berman, and the chapter of Jewish leadership and scholarship that will be his. I humbly do so with my deepest prayers that Hashem continues to bless our new president with strength, wisdom, good counsel and good health as he steers us forward l’hagdil Torah ul’ha’adira, to grow Torah and glorify it

I can best describe the educational philosophy inherent in the phrase “Toras Emes” by sharing two vignettes of the Rav zt”l. Both are vivid in my mind and continually orient me.

The first one repeated itself many a time. The Rav would fall silent during a shiur, in the middle of developing an idea. My fellow talmidim and I remember it well. Sometimes the silence lasted but a few moments as he simply searched for the most accurate phrase, the most rigorous presentation.

Sometimes it seemed well over 10 minutes, hard as it is to imagine so many years later. Often the silence was interrupted with what would become the first nusach, the initial iteration of his idea, only to be refined with greater precision following further moments of reflection. Sometimes it was a question that gave him pause. Most often, he soundlessly deliberated in order to weave together, with absolute consistency, the many texts on his mind, for which he had inestimable reverence. There was to be no daylight between the responsibilities of the posek, who had to arrive at an actionable halachic conclusion and the teacher who had to present Torah with accuracy and excitement.

The clock was never of consequence. That was the same clock that may well explain the readiness of the young students to gloss over the Rav’s concern, but that readiness carried no weight.

It was during those silences, offered with no apology, that I learned to appreciate the yiras Shamayim (fear of Heaven) that demands rigor and integrity in understanding Torah, its texts, laws and precepts. Those moments of undisturbed reflection became the “Rashi,” the commentary, to the way we begin our days, “reishis chochma yiras Hashem” — the beginning of wisdom is the fear of Heaven (Tehillim 111:10).

At first glance, we may find this experience inconsistent with another vignette frozen in my mind, as it was the first time I merited to hear the Rav. It was 1975, and the RCA membership convened on our campus to hear the Rav reflect:

“... the study of Torah is an act of surrender. That is why Chazal stress so many times the importance of humility, and that the proud person can never be a great scholar, only the humble person. Why is humility necessary? Because the study of Torah means meeting the Almighty, and if a finite being meets the infinite, the Almighty, the Maker of the world, of course this meeting must precipitate a mood of humility, and humility results in surrender. What do we surrender to the Almighty? We surrender two things: first, we surrender to the Almighty the everyday logic, or what I call mercantile logic the logic of the businessman or the utilitarian person, and we embrace another logic — the logic m’Sinai. Second, we surrender the everyday will, which is very utilitarian and superficial, and we embrace another will — the will m’Sinai.” [<http://arikahn.blogspot.com/2013/03/rabbi-soloveitchik-talmudtorah-and.html>]

The obvious deliberateness with which the Rav chose the word “surrender” portrayed submission, with the attendant rejection of attractive and meaningful intellectual alternatives. To be charged by the author of The Lonely Man of Faith, who conceived of “majestic man,” to surrender all of that divinely gifted majesty, became an enduring lesson in yiras Shamayim and the immutable truths of Torah.

Throughout the years, we would watch the Rav bring his powerful intellect to the fore to elaborate with unmatched clarity and from that elevated peak, humbly surrender to the requirements of halacha and mesorah. On the one hand, we are enjoined to use the keenest powers of human intellect to uncover G-d’s truths. On the other hand, we are expected to submit that same intellect to truths revealed. Indeed, it is that ultimate acquiescence that validates and animates our tireless pursuit to comprehend the will of Hashem, in all its depth and complexity.

Thus, the Rav explained, the importance of the Rambam’s statement: The section containing Sh’ma Yisrael is read first because it contains the uniqueness of G-d, love for Him and study of His Torah, which is the main principle that everything is dependent on. Rambam, Hilchos Kerias Sh’ma 1:2

Why does the Rambam include the study of Torah as part of the mitzvah of kerias Sh’ma? The Rav explained that sparing no effort in the pursuit of an accurate interpretation is an act of kabbalas ol malchus Shamayim — acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. To do so knowing that we will embrace the truths of Torah, irrespective of the discomfort or sacrifice or countercultural position that they may impose, is an expression of the “ol,” the yoke of kabbalas ol malchus Shamayim.

The concept of Toras Emes appears in the berachos that are recited during Kerias HaTorah, but after, not before reading that parsha of the Torah. Why is that? The public reading of the Torah was never the opportunity to engage in the rigor of Torah study. Therefore, it is not introduced with la'asok b'divrei Torah, to toil in the words of Torah, but rather with our grateful recognition of the singular chosenness expressed through matan Torah. Nevertheless, as we step away from the public presentation of a parsha, we recognize that we embrace that parsha without compromise or apology, and hence recite v'nasan lanu Toras emes, He gave us a Torah of Truth. The mindful pursuit of Toras Emes that lies ahead is as vital as it is daunting. All indications are that the minds of the future will be shaped or conditioned by a culture that has little patience for true curiosity or for the rigors of painstaking deliberation. All indications are that the hearts of the future will judge only by the unanchored standards of their prevailing culture. The bais hamedrash of Toras Emes will challenge all of that and continue to nurture the robust tzelem Elokim, image of G-d, with all of its magnificent discussion, noisy debate and silent reflection. The bais hamedrash of Toras Emes will test many millennials as it demands to be the center around which all else will be valued without apology or concession. It may well be that the excitement of inquiry and the utter joy of discovery will only be found in that bais hamedrash. It is certainly the only address for experiences, which genuinely resonate with the Jewish soul.

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Weekly Parsha VA-ETCHANAN
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Shabbat immediately after the sad fast day of 9 Av is called Shabbat Nachamu – the Shabbat of comfort and consolation. This Shabbat draws its name from the first two words of the prophet Yeshayahu, and this series of prophetic readings continues for seven weeks with a message of hope and contentment.

The prophetic readings leading up to the ninth of Av were only three in number, but the message of consolation is more than twice that in number. The prophet himself notes that the comforting message will be granted in a double manner (Nachamu Nachamu), and we receive seven weeks of comfort to counterbalance the three-week messages of doom and destruction.

We are all aware that there are many varied and valid reasons and motives for Jewish customs and traditions. All of these customs regarding the readings of these specific Haftorot and the reasons for them should not be treated lightly, and one should not dismiss them in a cavalier fashion simply because it may no longer seem to be appropriate to the situation.

Human life and behavior are too complex to attribute it to just one motive and reason. This is true regarding all details and aspects of Jewish tradition as well. There are ample examples in past and present Jewish society, how the abandonment of certain customs that modernists felt to be anachronistic eventually led to violations of explicit Torah commandments and values themselves. Judaism should never be observed and viewed in a simplistic, superficial manner. It is too grand for such treatment.

There is a profound and important lesson to be derived from the fact that the prophecies of destruction required only three weeks of public reading while the prophecies of hope and consolation mandated a seven-week period of time on the Jewish calendar. Destruction requires far less time and effort to achieve its sad and nefarious goal. When the end comes, it does so with inevitably and swiftness. Great empires and powerful countries can exist for centuries but are consigned into the dustbin of history in only a few decades or even a few years. It is so much faster and easier to slide down than to attempt to rise and rebuild and struggle forward.

Rebuilding is a process, and it is never accomplished in an instantaneous and easy manner. There are many ups and downs that rebuilding will engender, disappointments, frustrations and even reversals. It will take much more time for the effort to comfort the Jewish people in its continuing effort to rebuild itself anew in its ancient homeland currently. The Jewish world was almost destroyed in a few years in the past century. It will take time to rebuild it. It is a continuing process along a very bumpy road. We should be comforted realizing that the process has begun and is underway. There are many weeks and years ahead of us, as we continue our quest to be comforted. But we are already blessed with the knowledge that we have reached the season of comfort and consolation.

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
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subject: Rabbi Riskin on the Weekly Torah Portion
Shabbat Shalom: Va'etchanan (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11)
By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “You are a holy nation to the Lord your God... a treasured nation from amongst all the nations.... It was not because you were more numerous than all the nations... that God chose you since you are the smallest of all nations. It is rather because God loves you and because of His keeping of the oath which He swore to your ancestors...” (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

What is the real meaning of the “election” of Israel? It cannot be because we are better than all other nations; to dispel that notion one need only to turn again to the prophetic sections we’ve been reading these past three Sabbaths from Jeremiah and Isaiah, railing and thundering against the Israelites because of their immorality and hypocrisy.

Nor is it because the nation of Israel was a paragon of virtue in the early days of its formation. On the contrary, during the early chapters of Deuteronomy Moses actually recounts the backsliding of our people from the wanton worship of the Golden Calf just forty days after the Revelation at Sinai, to all of the petty complaints and serious rebellions against Moses (and God!) throughout the Book of Numbers. God could not possibly have been under any illusions about the superior moral quality of this family – nation that He had “chosen.”

Were we then elected because we were “the least among nations,” the fewest in number and the weakest in power, as the above quoted text would suggest? Is that a reason for being chosen? What is the source of this “love” for us of which our Bible speaks? Can it be that the Creator of the Universe fell prey to a totally arbitrary and irrational love which is the Achilles’ heel, the tragic undoing of so many of His mortal creatures, when love is merely an expression of emotion to the total exclusion of logic?

Furthermore, why refer to this particular Sabbath as Shabbat Nahamu, the Sabbath of comfort? Historically, the Israelites continued to fast in memory of the destruction of the First Temple throughout the period of the rebuilt Second Temple and renewed Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem. We know this from a variety of sources, including Zechariah 7,8, from Josephus, 2nd Commonwealth historian, as well as from the legalist- philosopher Maimonides (Interpretations of the Mishnah, Rosh HaShanah 18). After all, even our miraculous survival and subsequent rebuilding cannot begin to remove the pain of the righteous adults and innocent children who lost their lives in the period of destruction, or erase the force of the agonizing question, Eicha?! Can our generation’s remarkable return to our promised homeland provide any kind of reasonable response to the piercing question mark which arises from the smoke-stacks of Auschwitz and Buchenwald? So, from whence comes our comfort?

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, in his masterful work Faith after the Holocaust, cites a bold and startling passage of the Talmud (B.T. Yoma 69b) which sheds light on this issue:

“Said R. Yehoshua ben Levi (a survivor of the Second Temple devastation): Why was our Judicial synod called the “Men of the Great Assembly”?”

Because they restored the (Divine) crown to its pristine glory.

Moses came and countered, ‘the great, powerful and awesome God’ (Deut. 10)

Jeremiah came and declared, ‘The Gentiles have undermined the infrastructure of His Temple; where is His awesomeness?’ And he (Jeremiah) deleted (the word) awesome (from God’s praises in the Amidah). Daniel came and cried out, ‘The Gentiles are subjugating His children; where is His power?’

And he (Daniel) deleted (the word) powerful (from God’s praises in the Amidah).

They (the Men of the Great Assembly, who formulated our prayers) came and restored, saying, ‘The very opposite is the truth! Herein lies the power behind God’s power: that He conquers His instinct (to set evil off at the pass before it wreaks its damage) and has patience for the wicked (to wait for them to repent and repair the world). And herein lies His awesomeness: were it not for the awesomeness of the Holy One Blessed be He, how could one (paltry) nation withstand and survive the (powerful) nation’s roundabout.’ Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s message is indubitably clear. God has created an imperfect world of freedom of choice, a seemingly absurd and lawless world in which individuals will do even that which the Almighty would not want them to do (the Kabbalistic notion of tzimtzum, the willful “contraction” of the goodness and justice of the Creator of the Universe, as it were, in order to leave room for a world of free choice). As the prophet Isaiah (45:7) declares, “Creator of light and Maker of darkness, Doer of peace and Maker of evil (sic), I am the Lord, the Doer of all these things.” God has confidence – and even guarantees – that eventually the wicked will repent, that human beings will eventually succeed in repairing and perfecting this world in the Kingship of the Divine, that there will eventually be a messianic period of world peace and well-being (Isaiah 2, Micah 4, Zechariah 7-9). Hence God allows the world to proceed in accordance “with its customary way,” without preventing stolen seed from taking root in the ground, or withering the hand uplifted to smite an innocent human. Hence, “there is not reward for commandments in this world;” only in the other, eternal world of souls and spirituality will there be proper rewards for deeds well done (B.T. Kidushin 39).

Israel plays a pivotal role in this drama. We are God’s “holy nation and priest-teachers” to the world (S’forno, ad loc), the descendants of Abraham who chose God before God chose him (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah Laws of Idolatry 1, 1-3), guaranteed by God of eternal progeny who would eventually live in the Land of Israel and teach ethical monotheism to the entire world (Genesis 12:1-3)

Those who opposed ethical monotheism, relying on might rather than right, brute violent power rather than love and morality, have all too often ruled the world – from Pharaoh the totalitarian despot of Egypt, to Nazi Hitler to radical Wahabi Islam. The very survival of Israel, our miraculous ability to remain alive despite Egyptian enslavement and holocaust conflagration with horrific exiles and persecutions in between, – regardless of the fact that we are the most paltry in number and the weakest in power of all nations of the world (indeed, for almost 2000 years we were completely stateless and army-less), – makes us God’s witnesses, *adat HaShem*, testifying that God is indeed a God of love and morality, a God of right over might, a God of morality over brute force.

This is God’s power, this is God’s awesomeness, and this is the source of our great comfort: God chose you since you are the smallest (weakest) of all nations, because God loves you” – not because you are perfect but because you are morally better than your enemies, and because your very survival

testifies to the existence and eventual triumph of a God of Justice, morality and peace.

Shabbat Shalom!

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subject: [Rav Kook Torah]

VaEtchanan: Mezuzah and Eretz Yisrael

Rav Kook Torah

The Torah commands us to affix mezuzot to the doors of our houses.

This mitzvah would not seem to have any particular connection to the Land of Israel. After all, the obligation applies equally anywhere in the world.

Under certain conditions, even a boat on the high seas must have mezuzot!

The Talmud in Menachot 44a, however, does make a distinction when performing this mitzvah in or outside the Land of Land. While homeowners are obligated to affix mezuzot as soon as they move in, renters may wait thirty days. Yet this grace period of thirty days only applies outside the Land.1

Why is that?

The Talmud writes that a person renting a home in the Land must immediately put up a mezuzah because of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael*, the mitzvah to settle the Land of Israel.

Yishuv Eretz Yisrael

According to Rashi, the Sages wished to encourage people to live in the Land. If a person spends money on mezuzot - and the obligation to install mezuzot falls on the renter, not the owner - then he will be less likely to leave his residence in Israel. The renter has already put money in the apartment, and usually one is not allowed to remove mezuzot upon vacating the premises.

Additionally, even if the renter does leave, the apartment will be more attractive to other Jewish renters, as it is already outfitted with mezuzot.

Rav Kook had trouble accepting this explanation. Are mezuzot so expensive that this will determine where someone will choose to live?

Tosafot suggested that, on a Biblical level, only homeowners are obligated to affix mezuzot. As the verse says, “Write them on the doorposts of your houses and gates” (Deut. 6:9). The rabbis extended the obligation to renters, on condition that they live in the house for more than thirty days. Why thirty days?

Rabbeinu Manoach (cited by Beit Yosef, YD 286) wrote that only a true “dweller” is obligated to affix mezuzot. Until thirty days, the renter is still considered a “temporary dweller” - a traveler who may decide to leave for another location - and is exempt from observing the mitzvah.

But renting in the Land of Israel is different. A person fulfills the positive mitzvah of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* with any type of dwelling in the Land - even renting. As the verse says, “וְיִשְׁבְּתֶם בָּהֶּן” (Num. 33:53). Rav Kook reasoned that since renting is deemed ‘dwelling’ in terms of the mitzvah of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael*, it is also considered ‘dwelling’ for the mitzvah of *mezuzah*.2

Children of Zion
Rav Kook called attention to this Halakhic ruling - that Jews living in Eretz Yisrael immediately acquire full residency - to the British High Commissioner.

Despite Britain’s promises to establish a national home for the Jewish people, the British government imposed strict limits on Jewish immigration. The authorities were deporting illegal immigrants, and Rav Kook requested that the deportations be halted.

The High Commissioner was surprised. “I know that you respect law and order,” he noted. “After all, the Talmud teaches *dina d’malkhuta dina* — one must obey the law of the land. These people have violated the law by entering the country illegally. How can you argue in their favor?”

“The law refers to new immigrants,” Rav Kook replied. “But these people are not new immigrants; they are returning citizens.
“Our Sages explained that a Jew who was born in Zion, as well as one who looks forward to seeing her, are both considered to be children of Zion. ‘הָיָה נִשְׁמָה אֶחָדָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל (a57 tobuteK) saw ohw nosrep a ,sdrow rehto nI .(a57 tobuteK) הַגּוֹלֵד בְּהָאָרֶץ וְהַיָּדוּשׁ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל הֵם בְּנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם וְיִשְׂרָאֵל הֵם בְּנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם’ born outside the country, yet yearns to see Zion and Jerusalem — he or she is also a child of Zion.
“Spurred by great yearnings for Zion, these new arrivals took great risks and traveled by circuitous routes to come here. As the rabbis wrote, these Jews are ‘children of Zion.’ They are not new immigrants, but returning citizens!” Rav Kook concluded warmly, “Our country should receive them with open arms, like an overjoyed mother welcoming home children who return, after long years spent wandering in distant lands.”

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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim
From the teachings of the Rosh Yeshiva
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Ask Rav Aviner: toratravaviner@yahoo.com

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

Leaving Torah Class to Use the Restroom

Q: Ha-Rav published in a text message in the name of Prof. Nechama Leibowitz that one should not leave a Torah class in the middle to use the restroom. But isn't it forbidden to "hold it in"?

A: Yes, it is an explicit Gemara in Yevamot (64b) that the students of Rav Huna did not use the restroom in the middle of a Torah class and their health was negatively affected. And see Terumat Ha-Deshen (#16). But this is not our case. Rav Huna's classes were extremely long, while ours are relatively short, and one can use the restroom before and after the class. Furthermore, when I served in Tzahal, I sat in ambush for 10 hours and did not use the restroom. I planned ahead and did not drink much water beforehand.

Messiah without Knowing

Q: Can a person be the Mashiach without knowing that he is the Mashiach?

A: No. See Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 11:4 for the list of criteria to know if someone is the Mashiach.

Tefillin during Musaf

Q: I accidentally Davened Musaf of Rosh Chodesh with Tefillin. Did I fulfill my obligation?

A: Certainly. This is not a negative but a positive. It seems that in the past, when they wore Tefillin all day long, they did not remove them during Musaf on Rosh Chodesh. In our days, Yemenite Jews wear them during Musaf on Rosh Chodesh.

Recording from the Radio

Q: If there is a Torah class on the radio, is it permissible to record it for myself?

A: Yes. It seems that the Rabbi and the radio station would allow it as long as it is not for commerce or public use.

Tefillin on Person in Coma

Q: Is it permissible to put Tefillin on a person who is in a coma?

A: There is no obligation, but it is permissible. Perhaps he will feel it. Bringing Ketubah on Vacation

Q: When a family goes on vacation, does the wife have to bring her Ketubah with her, since she should have it available at all times?

A: No, since there is a fear that it will be lost (The Satmar Rebbe answered in the same way, and added that it is better to leave it at home in a safe place, and to always know its exact location. In the book "Nitzotzei Tomer" volume 1, p. 453).

Who is Greater – Vilna Gaon or Chatam Sofer

Q: Who was greater – the Vilna Gaon or the Chatam Sofer?

A: Both were among the greatest of our Rabbis in Halachah, in holiness and in purity (The Admor Imrei Sofer of Erlau once related that a grandson of the Vilna Gaon asked his father, the Yad Sofer [a grandson of the Chatam Sofer], who was greater – the Vilna Gaon or the Chatam Sofer? The Yad Sofer did not want to answer, and place his head between the two great mountains which were these Rabbis. The questioner did not give up and would keep asking from time to time. One time the Yad Sofer finally "broke" and gave an answer. On that very day, the Yad Sofer was walking in the street and was struck by a bike and broke his hand. The Yad Sofer saw his injury as a punishment for his brazenness in commenting on the greatness of these two towering figures. Someone later asked the Imrei Sofer: Did you ever ask your father what he answered? He responded in surprise: After he told me what happened to him because he expressed his opinion about it, would I dare to ask him this question?! In the book "Be-Mechitzat Zekeini", pp. 216-217).

Running to Shul

Q: It is a Mitzvah to run to Shul, but it looks weird!

A: One should run in a normal manner and not cause a Chilul Hashem (Piskei Teshuvot 90:18). By the way, one should also run to the Beit Midrash and to any Mitzvah.

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Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Va'etchanan

For the week ending 1 August 2020 / 11 Av 5780

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parsha Insights

Why Was I Created?

“Now, O Yisrael, listen to the decrees and to the ordinances that I teach you to perform...” (4:1)

One of the privileges of having been associated with Ohr Somayach for the last thirty is that I've met, and in some cases been close to, several human beings who were clearly living on a different level than the rest of mankind. One of them (who will, of course, remain nameless) is a genius in the art of human relationships. He once distilled the essence of one's relationship with one's fellow into three principles. I'll try to present the first of these principles this week, and, G-d willing, the other two in the weeks to come. His first principle is, "I was created to serve others, and no one was created to serve me." This may sound a little extreme. What, my entire existence is for other people? Ostensibly, this sounds to be beyond the "letter of the law." But Hashem wants us to go beyond the letter of the law. When we keep to the letter of the law, we treat the mitzvahs like a business transaction — you do this for me and I'll do that for you. Unlike a business transaction, Hashem doesn't want or need our mitzvahs. What use does He have for them? If we are very righteous, what does that give Him? What Hashem wants is our heart. When you get a present from someone you love, you're getting the person you love wrapped up inside the present. When you get a present from someone you don't care about, you're getting something you like — delivered by a delivery boy.

So, really, to go beyond the letter or the law is the essence of our relationship with Hashem. However, upon deeper examination it could be that, "I was created to serve others and no one was created to serve me" is indeed the letter of the law, and not an exceptional level of righteousness.

The Talmud in Shabbat (31a) says, "Rava said: After departing from this world, when a person is brought to judgment for the life he lived in this world, they say to him ... Did you conduct business faithfully? Did you designate times for Torah study? Did you engage in procreation? Did you

await salvation? Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom and understand one matter from another?

The Reishit Chochma, quoting from Mesechet Chibut Hakever, says that in addition to these questions, a person is asked, “Did you crown Hashem as King over you, morning and evening?” Meaning, did you say the Shema morning and evening. And, “Did you crown your fellow over you by giving him/her pleasure (nachat ruach)?

“Now, O Yisrael, listen to the decrees and to the ordinances that I teach you to perform...”

And so is it when the Torah speaks of decrees and ordinances. Just as the questions in masechet Shabbat are of the essence, so too, “I was created to serve others and no one was created to serve me” is an essential duty — and not a level of saintliness.

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Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message

“The Mandate for Parental Involvement in Jewish Education”

(updated and revised from Va’etchanan 5761-2001)

In this week’s parasha, parashat Va’etchanan, we encounter two fundamental declarations of the Jewish faith: the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6-18), and the Shema prayer (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), “Hear O Israel, the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is one.”

The first paragraph of the Shema prayer begins with the words: וְאֶהְיֶה לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים יְחִידִים. This verse calls on every Jew to love G-d with all one’s heart, all one’s soul and all one’s might.

The Sh’ma prayer continues: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לְבָבְךָ וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ וְעַל כָּל מְצִוְתֵיךָ וְעַל לְבָבְךָ, and these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart, וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ, and you shall teach them to your children, and you shall speak to them diligently, וְעַל כָּל מְצִוְתֵיךָ, when you sit in your home, and when you go on your way, when you lie down and when you rise up.

Let us focus on the phrase, וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ, which serves as the Torah’s mandate requiring Jews to educate their children. (It is fascinating that there is no direct Mitzvah in the Torah for a Jew to study Torah, other than studying Torah in order to be able to teach one’s children!)

Of all the 613 mitzvot of the Torah, perhaps the most vital for the continuity and continuation of the Jewish people is the mitzvah of וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ, and you shall teach your children. Jewish education is the lifeline and the lifeblood of Jewish life. After all, it is Jewish education that has proven, throughout Jewish history, to be the most effective method of educating large numbers of people, over long periods of time, to ethical and moral living.

Furthermore, more than 3300 years of Jewish history confirm that there is absolutely no chance of Jews surviving as Jews for the next generation, without our people’s intense and passionate commitment to Jewish education.

An analysis of the words וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ reveals a host of profound insights. The root of the word, וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ, can be traced to the word שָׁנָה, which, like the Hebrew word שָׁנָה—two, means to repeat, over and over, implying that Jewish learning and rituals must become habitual and constant in a Jew’s life, and become ingrained into the very essence of the Jew. This statement underscores, that for continuity, real continuity, there needs to be a sincere commitment to the practices and rituals of Jewish life.

An alternate root of the word וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ may be the root-word שָׁנָה, shin nun nun, which means sharp. Jewish education must be intense, sharp, meaningful, exciting, and cutting edge.

But, perhaps most of all, the verse boldly declares: וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ, you shall teach your children! Most parents today pass off their children’s education to

professionals—professional teachers, tutors, schools, yeshivot, day schools. With this verse, the Torah underscores that the fundamental, bottom line, obligation of the parent is וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ, you shall teach your children. Even though parents may rely on professional teachers, the buck ultimately stops with the parent. In fact, the Hebrew term for parent, הוֹרֵה—“horeh,” is derived from the Hebrew word מוֹרֶה—“moreh”—to teach. A parent is a teacher—the primary teacher!

Consequently, if a school fails to properly educate, the school is not at fault, the parent is at fault. If the teacher fails to teach properly, the responsibility lies with the parent, not the teacher. It is the parent’s responsibility to be on top of the educational services provided by the school, to be well informed about the effectiveness of their children’s teachers, and to correct the “miseducation” that often takes place in school settings. While it is certainly true that children spend many hours in formal educational settings, the “quality time” spent at home with parents is of far greater value in terms of “real” education.

The Midrash Rabbah has a fascinating comment on Genesis 27:22, that recalls the story of Jacob deceiving his father to receive the blessing.

All the idolaters gathered about Avnemus of Gadara (a first century non Jewish philosopher) and asked him: Can we defeat the nation of Israel in battle? Avnemus replied: Go out and make the rounds of all their synagogues and houses of study. If you find children in them, chirping away (while studying Torah) you will be unable to defeat them. For this is what their father [Isaac] promised them (Genesis 27:22): “The voice is the voice of Jacob”—as long as the voice of Jacob is found in the synagogues (and houses of study), the hands will not be the hands of Esau. But if not, “The hands are the hands of Esau,” and you will be able to defeat them.

There’s no such thing as overdosing on Jewish education. There’s no such thing as being too passionate or too extreme concerning the value and importance of Jewish education. I have often said regarding the challenges of raising Jewishly-committed children in today’s environment, that if parents aspire for their children to be “passionate” about Judaism—due to the blandishments and distractions of secular society, they will be fortunate to wind up with moderate children. If parents aim for their children to be moderate about their Judaism, they’ll wind up casual. And, if the parents themselves are casual, they might wind up with, G-d forbid, Episcopalian grandchildren! One never outgrows the need for Jewish education, it must be perpetually enhanced. Jews must always be in the “Growth mode.”

Of course, it is crucial for parents to serve as educational role models for their children. Even parents who have personally had a limited Jewish education, it is never too late to learn. Nothing can be more impactful than for a child to see his/her parents eagerly attending Torah classes. With the abundance of classes available today, both online and in actual class settings, there is simply no excuse not to participate. “Do as I say,” is not nearly as powerful as “Do as I do.”

For those who are not fortunate enough to be in a position to send their children to an intensive Jewish educational setting, which is absolutely basic today, keep in mind the Torah’s admonition: וְעַל שְׁנֵי עֵינֶיךָ. Take ten, fifteen minutes, out of your busy schedule, twice or three times a week, to discuss Jewish issues and Torah issues with your children. Even if your child is away at college, call and discuss Jewish or Torah-related issues, so your child will clearly recognize how important these values are to his/her parents. This practice, of course, can enhance the commitment of those children who obtain strong Jewish educations as well.

Please, do not compromise on Jewish education. The alternative is very much Jewish oblivion.

Please note: The observance of the fast of Tisha b’Av, marking the destruction of both the Jerusalem Temples, starts on Wednesday night, July 29th and continues through Thursday night, July 30, 2020. Have a meaningful fast.

The Shabbat after Tisha b’Av is traditionally known as Shabbat Nachamu, in deference to the first of a series of seven Haftarot (prophetic messages) of

consolation, drawn from the book of Isaiah, that are read between Tisha b'Av and Rosh Hashana. "Nachamu, nachamu amee," be comforted My nation, are the opening words of Isaiah 40. This year, the joyous festival of Tu b'Av, the fifteenth of Av, is celebrated on Tuesday night and Wednesday, August 4th and 5th, 2020. Happy Tu b'Av. May you be blessed.

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Va'eschanan

פרשת ואתחנן תש"פ

ואתחנן אל ד' ... אעברה נא ואראה ... ויתעבר ד' בי למענכם

I implored Hashem at that time... Let me now cross and see... But Hashem became angry with me because of you. (3:23,25,26)

Moshe Rabbeinu prayed and prayed. Chazal say that the word, *va'eschanan*, I implored, implies that Moshe prayed 515 times, which its numerical equivalent. The word, *va'eschanan*, is derived from *chinam*, free, alluding to the nature of this prayer. Being one of the ten terms of prayer, it is used when one seeks an undeserved favor from Hashem. Why did Moshe use this term? Surely he was deserving. The righteous never feel that they have a claim on Hashem's favor. His mercy is reserved for those who feel "worthy" of it. The righteous and the humble feel that Hashem owes them nothing.

The *Midrash (Rabbah 87:10)* relates the following dialogue that ensued between Moshe and Hashem. Hashem said to Moshe, "You are grabbing the rope from both ends. (In other words, you cannot go forward, since you are pulling from both sides.) If you want to fulfill, 'Let me now cross and see,' then you cannot ask Me to forgive the nation. If you insist that I forgive them, then you cannot enter into the Land." This *Midrash* begs elucidation. How would the nation's forgiveness affect Moshe's entering the Land and vice versa?

Horav Moshe Bick, zl, explains that Moshe's request that the nation be absolved for the sin of the spies and their unwarranted, inappropriate reaction to the misinformation they received ran counter to his request that he be granted entry into the Land. There is a rule that *tzaddik gozeir v'HaKadosh Baruch Hu mekayeim*, the righteous decree and Hashem carries out their wish. Hashem would, therefore, have listened to Moshe's request concerning the nation. This rule applies, however, only under such circumstances that the *tzaddik* does not derive personal benefit from his plea. If he has a vested interest, either directly or even indirectly, the plea will not be effective. The reason for this is that the *tzaddik* serves as a *tzinor*, pipe, conduit, through which Hashem delivers His beneficence. For the *tzaddik* to be a conduit, no obstruction can prevent the smooth delivery of the Heavenly blessings. Thus, *Chazal (Berachos 17b)* say that the entire world is sustained through the merit of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, because he needed nothing. He was able to survive on a measure of carobs the entire week. Thus, once the *tzaddik* takes for himself, the conduit becomes obstructed, and his decree is less effective.

When Moshe prayed to Hashem to allow him to enter the Land, it was a personal plea, a personal prayer. This precluded his speaking on behalf of the nation. Thus, Hashem told him: If you go, they cannot, and, if they go, you cannot. In order for Me to grant them absolution, you must defer entering *Eretz Yisrael*. This is why Moshe asked for a *matnas chinam*, an undeserved favor, a "free" gift from Hashem. He knew that if he used his merit, it would hurt the nation's chances. Therefore, he told the nation, "Hashem became angry with me. I lost out because of you. The only reason that I did not enter the Land was that, had I gone, you would not." This is but one other case in which Moshe, our quintessential leader, sacrificed for the nation.

ויאמר ד' אלי רב לך אל תוסף דבר אלי בדבר הזה

Hashem said to me, "It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter." (3:26)

The *Midrash Tanchuma (Va'eschanan 4)* relates that Moshe Rabbeinu said to Hashem, "*Ribon HaOlamim*, You referred to me as Moshe, My servant (*Bamidbar 12:7*). I truly am Your servant. You also wrote in Your Torah (*Shemos 21:5*) that the *eved Ivri*, Hebrew bondsman who refuses to leave servitude after the prescribed six years goes through a process and *avado l'olam*, he remains in servitude until *Yovel*. Thus, Hashem, I ask to be allowed to remain in my position as an *eved* and continue serving You." Hashem replied, "*Rav lach*, it is too much for you. It has already been decreed that you are to die." The *Rambam (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 10:4)* writes that when a *Navi*, prophet, prophesizes a punishment (i.e. an event such as death, hunger or war), even if it does not come to pass, it is no indication that the prophet is not truthful. Hashem is merciful and the person (people) might have repented, so Hashem may have absolved him (them). If the *Navi* promised that something good would occur, however, and it does not materialize, he is deemed to be a *Navi sheker*, false prophet. Anything good that emanates from Hashem, any decree for good which Hashem decrees (which is what the *Navi* claimed would happen) must occur. Otherwise, the *Navi* is a false prophet.

The *Brisker Rav, zl*, applies the *Rambam* to explain Moshe's appeal to Hashem to allow him to live and lead the nation into *Eretz Yisrael*. The Almighty had the power to change His decree from bad/destruction to good, thus permitting him to enter the Land. Hashem responded that, in theory, Moshe was correct. He had told him, however, to refrain from speaking to/leading the nation, because Yehoshua's "turn" had come. Part of the *gezeirah*, decree against Moshe, was that he would no longer lead the nation, and that the reins of leadership would hence be transferred over to Yehoshua, his trusted student. The *gezeirah* thus includes "good" (Yehoshua's leadership). This cannot be rescinded. The "good" must materialize, even at the expense of Moshe's continued life.

We see from here that it is not always as we see it through our eyes of flesh and blood. Indeed, Hashem renders all decisions precisely because His sweeping vision sees everything at once. Avraham Avinu died five years earlier than Yitzchak Avinu, so that he would not be witness to his grandson, Eisav, going off the *derech*, leaving the path, and becoming the paradigm of evil that he become. Now, let us imagine that Yitzchak and Rivkah Imeinu, who waited twenty years for their twins, would have been blessed with progeny right after the wedding. This is why I say, *Baruch Hashem*, the Almighty makes the decisions. What we do not know is for our own good.

ראה למדתי אתכם חוקים ומשפטים כאשר צוני ד' אלקיך

See, I have taught you decrees and ordinances, as Hashem, my G-d, has commanded me. (4:5)

Chazal derive an interesting *halachah* from this *pasuk*. Moshe Rabbeinu enjoins the nation to observe his manner of teaching the law to the nation. Just as he performed his mission gratis, likewise, when a Jew teaches Torah to his fellow Jew, he should not do so for remuneration. Does that mean that the thousands of *rebbeim, moros, roshei yeshivah, rabbanim, roshei kollel, menahalim*, anybody who teaches and disseminates Torah, should relinquish payment? Does this indicate that their profession is a "non-profession"? You get what you pay for. The salary one commands indicates the significance and value of the position. If one does not command much of a salary – or worse, does it for nothing – is this an indication that the endeavor in which he is engaged is of little consequence and even less significance?

Clearly not. In *Yalkut Meam Loez, Horav Yaakov Culi, zl*, offers the following analogy to illuminate us concerning the incalculable value of Torah. A man was very close with the ruler of a small country. The ruler was a brilliant man who kept to himself, disinterested in becoming involved in the everyday strife and petty issues that plague other rulers. This ruler had his close circle of friends of which this man was one. He had enormous wealth; thus, he was satisfied to rule over his small country in a benevolent manner.

One day, the friend paid a visit to the ruler. He gave his friend an in-depth tour of the country and the palace. The two friends feasted together and had a great time enjoying one another's company. As a parting gift acknowledging their abiding relationship, the king gave his friend a sword. In those days, a sheathed sword was part of one's apparel, his daily uniform. The king's sword was comparable to his scepter; no one could ever wear it. This sword was made completely of the finest, purest gold, its hilt inlaid with diamonds and precious jewels. The material value of this sword was beyond a "king's ransom." This is the extent to which the king valued his relationship with his friend.

Effusive with expressions of gratitude, the friend bid the king farewell as he began his journey home. All went well, as the king presented his friend with the sword and returned to the palace. All the king's ministers stood in awe, observing the beauty of the sword. One of the ministers, himself a wealthy man, was envious of the friend who had received this impressive gift. He, too, wanted such a sword to call his own. He went to an artisan and commissioned an exact replica of the king's sword for his personal use. Once he received it in his hands, he was a new person, his envy ameliorated.

Weeks passed, and the minister took a trip outside the country's borders. When he came to the border, he was asked if he had anything to declare. He proudly displayed his sword, for which they assessed a heavy tax. The minister was beside himself with anger. "How dare you charge me taxes on my sword?" he complained. "Did you collect a similar tax a few weeks ago when the other person (the king's friend) with a similar sword passed through?" They replied that they had not. "Why is his sword any different than mine?" he railed at them.

"His sword is the sword that belonged to the king. Apart from its material value of gold and precious stones, it is part and parcel of the king's uniform, part of his honor and glory. We are unable to appraise such a sword. It is priceless! To place a premium on the sword would, by extension, impugn the honor of the king. What belongs to the king is above and beyond estimable value. We cannot say the same for your sword."

For those who have toiled in the vineyard of Torah, who have dedicated themselves and their families to a life of excellence in Torah, both in learning and dissemination, the value of Torah has never been a question. One cannot possibly place a price on Torah. To study it is our obligation; to teach and disseminate it is our privilege. How can anyone put a price on the prime entity that connects us with the Creator? A Torah educator receives remuneration for the time he expends during which he could have engaged in other, more lucrative, pursuits. No one receives payment for teaching Torah, because we are unable to assess this endeavor.

שמע ישראל ד' אלקינו ד' אחד

Hear, O' Yisrael: Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the One and Only. (6:4)

Judaism's seminal verse, the *pasuk* that accompanies us as we end our sojourn in this world is: *Shema Yisrael: Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*; "Hear, O' Yisrael, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One." The *Tur Orach Chaim* 61 rules that one places his hand over his eyes when he recites the *Shema*. What is the significance of *Shema*, and why does one cover his eyes upon reciting it? In his preface, the *Kol Arye* observes that two of Hashem's *Sheimos*, Names, are seemingly contrary to one another. The name *Elokim/Elokeinu* is the Name that represents the Almighty's, *middah*, attribute, of *Din*, Strict Judgment. The Name 'Hashem', on the other hand, represents *Rachamim*, the *middah* of Mercy. To the casual observer, mercy and strict judgment are incompatible with one another. If this is the case, when we say Hashem *Elokeinu*, Hashem is our G-d, we seem to be making a statement that is, at best, ambiguous.

This is specifically what we are underscoring when we say *Shema Yisrael: Hashem/Mercy and Elokeinu/Din* are one and the same. True, at times Hashem appears to us as acting with mercy and, at times, He comes across as manifesting judgment, but we believe that everything – both what appears to be merciful and what appears to be harsh judgment – all emanates from the Name 'Hashem,' which represents Mercy.

We now understand why this verse has such overriding significance. It is our way of confirming that everything that Hashem does is inherently good – even if at the moment of our declaration it does not appear that way. As Yaakov *Avinu* was about to descend to *Mitzrayim*, Egypt, he was filled with a sense of trepidation. At that point, Hashem appeared to him and comforted him, saying, "I shall descend with you to Egypt and I shall surely bring you up, and Yosef shall place his hand on your eyes" (*Bereishis* 46:3,4). Concerning the last words, *V'Yosef yoshis yado al einecha*, the *Zohar HaKadosh* says, *Da raza d'krias Shema*, "This is the secret of *Krias Shema*." The *Kol Aryeh* explains that since *Krias Shema* expresses the *achdus*, unity, of Hashem, and *Elokeinu*, expresses His Mercy and Judgment, it is a concept that is often difficult to accept. In moments of serious travail, when one is going through a frightening, painful experience, believing that what he is seeing is an act of Justice, it is best that he cover his eyes and not look. Just believe. Our model is Yosef *HaTzaddik* who experienced one *tzarah*, adversity, after another. In the end, Hashem demonstrated that it all fit together to produce a happy ending.

Everyone has his/her own personal *Shema Yisrael* story in which what appeared to be adverse actually acted as the segue to comfort and joy, similar to the *Chevlei Moshiach*, the birth pangs of *Moshiach*. We are living in a time – the last century – that has witnessed the greatest cruelty and pain that the Jewish Nation has experienced from time immemorial. Even today, I write this *dvar Torah* as I am sitting isolated in my house, due to the raging virus that is decimating innocent people. We wonder why. We ask when it will all end? We understand that these are the birth pangs of *Moshiach*, but what does that mean?

The following "story" related by *Horav Yisrael Chortkover, zl*, to a delegation of Jews, *chassidim* from Germany, who turned to him for a message of hope and reassurance, as the Nazis were beginning their reign of terror, illuminates this concept: "There were once two powerful kings who fought and conquered the entire world until each dominated half of the world. Veritably, they each would have continued fighting against one another, but each always harbored a fear of defeat that deterred them from launching an offensive. One day, one of the kings had a son; the other had a daughter. Let the two royals marry, and the child born to them would one day rule the world.

"Great idea, once the couple would have a child. Unfortunately, the dreams of the two prospective grandfathers did not materialize, since the young couple remained childless. The finest doctors were summoned to find a cure to whatever was preventing the couple from producing an heir or heiress to the throne. Finally, one brilliant doctor promised a cure, but he identified one danger: the potential mother might die to the complications that were likely to arise in the course of the pregnancy.

"Understanding that their child was the whole point of the marriage, the couple acquiesced to the risk. The princess conceived and, during the course of the pregnancy, the doctor was called a number of times when a crisis arose. He succeeded each time in preventing a tragedy from occurring. Once the princess entered her ninth month, her pains increased in earnest, until they became almost unbearable. Panicking, she called for the doctor, 'You must do something,' she cried in agony. 'Anything, as I cannot take this pain any longer!' This time the doctor said, 'I am terribly sorry. I am unable to help alleviate the pain. These pains are different than your previous ones. These pains are the real thing, the pangs of childbirth. The only panacea to your pain will be the birth of your child. You must suffer these pains if you want to give birth to your child.'"

The *Rebbe* looked at the delegation and sighed, "Do you understand the message? These are the birth pangs of *Moshiach*. They will subside when he arrives. May Hashem protect those who survive."

Shema Yisrael connects us as a people. Jews estranged from Torah and *mitzvos* know that the *Shema* is our clarion call of unity. In one of the secular *kibbutzim* (*Shomer Ha'Tzair*), one of the girls "rebelled" against her family and somehow became a *baalas teshuvah* and returned to her religious

heritage. She became engaged to a *ben Torah*, and together they decided to celebrate their wedding in the *kibbutz*. During the wedding, one of the senior guests, a member of another anti-religious *kibbutz*, asked one of the *kibbutzniks* who knew the bride and had seen her grow up, “How did you raise such a ‘flawed, shameless’ girl, who would humiliate all of you by attaching herself to such a foreign way of life?” The man replied, “It all began years ago when my daughter was but eight years old. My wife noticed a strange thing happening every night when she went to sleep. She would sit in bed, recite a few words, and go to sleep. This continued nightly for years. “Finally, we asked our daughter what she was doing. She explained that one of her friends from the *kibbutz* had discovered an old book in her grandmother’s house. It read, ‘Whoever recites *Shema Yisrael*, Hashem, Who is the Creator of the world, will be protected.’ The friend convinced not only my daughter to read this nightly before she went to sleep, but, all in all, girls from sixty families began doing this! Now, if you want to know who is my daughter’s friend who catalyzed this whole revolution: Tonight’s bride is the one!”

והיו הדברים האלה אשר מצוך היום על לבבך ושנתם לבניך

And these matters that I command you today shall be upon our heart. You shall teach them thoroughly to your children. (6:6,7)

The *Alshich HaKadosh* writes: “If these matters will penetrate deep into your heart and not simply be superficial, then your words will be able to penetrate into the hearts of your children/students.” The *Sefer HaYashar* (Rabbi Zerachyah or *Rabbeinu Tam*), expresses a similar thought, “Anything that emanates from the heart will enter into the heart (of the listener).” Whatever the mouth simply expresses will not get past the ear. In other words, only one who accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah, who makes it a part of himself, can effectively transmit that Torah to others.

Horav Shraga Grossbard, zl, taught that a *mechanech*, Torah educator, must be prepared to give everything up for the sake of his students’ learning. Furthermore, each *talmid*, student, must know this. He should feel that his *rebbe* is his *rebbe*, not just when life is good, when he is doing well, but even when he is under extreme pressure, when the learning does not come easily, when there are issues at home, both material and spiritual. A student should feel that he is uppermost in his *rebbe*’s mind. The student can only sense this when the *rebbe* as a person and as an educator manifests this attitude. One might suggest that this occurs when the *rebbe* cares about his vocation; thus, his student is paramount in his mind. According to the *Alshich*, it might be the other way around. It is because the Torah is so important to him that it is engraved on his heart, that he views its transmission as being of the greatest consequence. If one does not love the subject matter, it is difficult to demonstrate the proper passion in transmitting it to others.

Va’ani Tefillah

שבכל עת ערב ובקר וצהריים – *She’b’chol eis – erev vaboker v’tzaharaim*. (For Your miracles and favors) that are with us every season, evening, morning and afternoon.

At first glance, this *tefillah*, prayer, thanks Hashem for the many miracles and favors that He provides for all of us all of the time. For this, we express our gratitude thrice daily in the accompanying prayer. *Horav Shimon Schwab, zl*, takes it a step further, offering an alternative practical and insightful meaning. *Erev, boker* and *tzaharaim* refer to the moods or circumstances in which one finds himself. One may be in an emotional state of *erev*, evening, darkness, melancholy. It could be caused by age, lack of *mazel*, poor health, family issues; it is always something and, as a result, he is down. Or, he could be experiencing the exact opposite. Life is great: it is daylight, the sun is shining, and everything seems to be going his way. Last, it could be afternoon: the sun appears to be shining, then it begins to get cloudy, and the sun begins to set. Darkness is setting in and beginning to overwhelm the sunshine. We thank Hashem for guiding us through these periods/circumstances. We might become depressed in darkness, haughty in sunshine, and filled with ambiguity as the sun begins to set and the sunshine

is waning. Nonetheless, we know that Hashem is always present. For this, we express our gratitude.

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Pesukei Dezimra: Fulfilling Hashem’s Only Desire

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Ron Goldstein, who is seeking to find his way into observant Judaism, is having a casual conversation with Yosel Schwartz, an Orthodox accountant who invites him over often for Shabbos. As usual, Ron is peppering Yosel with questions:

“Recently, I began praying daily, and I have even begun to attend synagogue occasionally. I have many questions regarding both the prayers and the practices I see there.”

Of course, Yosel is more than happy to answer Ron’s questions.

“I would really appreciate it if you could provide me with background to some of the prayers. I see that there is a lot of structure and that various sections of the prayer are very dissimilar from one another. Some parts are consecutive blessings, others include extensive Biblical passages; some are praises, others are straightforward supplications. I have been told that the two most important parts of the morning and evening prayers are the Shma and the Shemoneh Esrei, and I have been reciting these parts for a few months now. But at this point I would like to understand some more about some of the other parts of our prayer. Could you help me?”

“Certainly; where would you like to start?”

“I am really curious to know more about the Psalms we read towards the beginning of the prayers. Psalms are really inspiring. But I also know that the Book of Psalms is fairly large. Why do we always recite the same ones every day; why not just read consecutive passages each day, as an introduction to the prayer? This would familiarize people with the whole, beautiful book.” It is interesting that Ron noticed the beauty of the Psalms David Hamelech bequeathed to the Jewish people. Indeed, it seems that David Hamelech was aware of the tremendous responsibility Hashem placed upon him to provide a link between Man and Hashem. This is evidenced in the following verse: “For an eternal covenant He placed in me” (Shmuel II 23:5). Although most commentaries explain that this verse refers to the eternity of his royal dynasty, which will soon return with Moshiach, it certainly also alludes to David’s unique role as the Psalmist of mankind.

Tehillim Each and Every Day, makes Certain we do not Stray

Yosel points out to Ron that the Psalms have, indeed, been organized into daily readings that enable one to complete them every week or month. Ron sounds interested in making this a regular practice; certainly, a laudatory observance. Yosel points out that the purpose in reciting parts of Tehillim during davening is not to create familiarity with the entire book, but something else altogether. In Yosel’s own words:

“To answer your question, I need to provide you with some background to this part of the prayer, which is called *Pesukei Dezimra*, Verses of Song.

Two Talmudic references provide the earliest basis for this part of our daily prayer. One source teaches that reciting Psalm 145 every day guarantees one a share in *olam haba*, the World to Come (Berachos 4b).” (Yosel is aware that an alternate reading [girsas] of this Gemara attributes the reward to

someone who recites this psalm three times every day. This is why we recite Ashrei, which includes this Chapter of Tehillim, three times a day, twice in Shacharis and once during Mincha. Yosef did not want to sidetrack the conversation with this information.)

Hashem Provides for All, even those without Wherewithal.

“What is unique about this Psalm that its recital merits such a special reward?” Ron inquired.

“The Gemara explains that this Psalm includes the verse beginning with the words Posayach es yodecha, which praises G-d Who opens His hands to provide for all creatures. One must make sure to recite this verse with much focus (Tur, Orach Chayim 51), as we thereby internalize the fact that Hashem supervises all his creatures and provides all their needs.

“In addition, the alphabetical acrostic of this Psalm demonstrates that King David intended that it be easily memorized and utilized by all of mankind (Rav Hirsch, Tehillim 25:1).

“The verses of this chapter that follow Posayach es yodecha, also include many basic tenets of Judaism. They note that Hashem’s deeds are justified; and that He is close to all who seek him truthfully, fulfills their desires, and protects them. It is critical to recite these passages with full focus on their significance. One who recites the verse Posayach es yodecha without thinking about its meaning is required to read it again, since he has missed the message of the passage. Some authorities conclude that if he completed the Psalm, he should repeat from the words Posayach es yodecha to the end of the Psalm (Mishnah Berurah 51:16).”

Begin the Day with G-d’s Praise, so that we Merit the Sun’s Rays

Ron replied: “This is really a nice, meaningful passage, and it certainly sets the tone for devotion and interacting with G-d, which is one of the beauties of Judaism. However, according to my references, this is only one Psalm among several others that we read.”

Yosef continues his explanation: “True. In another Talmudic passage, the great scholar, Rabbi Yosi, mentions his yearning to receive the special reward granted to those who recite the Pesukei Dezimra daily (Shabbos 118b). Also, reciting these praises with the proper awareness guarantees that our subsequent prayer will be accepted (Abudraham).

“The early authorities dispute how many Psalms Rabbi Yosi included in his Pesukei Dezimra. While Rashi mentions only Psalm 148 and Psalm 150 (presumably in addition to 145), the Rambam includes all of the last six Psalms of Tehillim as the kernel of Pesukei Dezimra. Accepted halachah follows the Rambam (Tur, Orach Chayim 51), and therefore we recite all six Psalms, but in extenuating circumstances we follow Rashi’s opinion. For example, someone with insufficient time to recite the entire Pesukei Dezimra with the tremendous focus it deserves and still be ready to begin the Shemoneh Esrei together with the congregation may omit the three extra Psalms that the Rambam includes and rely on Rashi’s opinion. We actually rule that one may delete even more sections of Pesukei Dezimra to enable one to begin the Shemoneh Esrei together with the congregation.”

Together we shall Pray, and then look Forward to a Wonderful Day!

“Why is it so important to begin the prayer together with everyone else?”

“Unfortunately, but realistically, we sometimes do not focus when we recite our prayers. In reality, prayers recited without proper thought should accomplish nothing and may even be harmful. Imagine someone who has the opportunity for an audience with a human king and arrives late, out of breath, and distracted. If his conversation is unfocused, he will probably be thrown into a dungeon for his disrespect! How much more so when talking to the King of kings!

“When our prayers fall short of what they should be, we deserve to have them rejected. There is one consolation, however. When a community prays together, G-d always accepts their prayers (Berachos 8a).”

Concentrate on Ashrei, and we will Focus while we Pray

“I now understand why Ashrei is an important prayer,” said Ron, “But I see in my Siddur that besides Psalm 145, that the Ashrei prayer also includes three other verses from Psalms, two before Psalm 145 and one after.”

“I see you’ve been paying a lot of attention to the prayers.”

“The Siddur I use notes the Biblical source of every prayer, so it does not really involve a lot of paying attention. Praying the way you are describing does require a lot of concentration. But I am eager to try. After all, for many years G-d meant little in my life – now that I understand how important He is to me, I am trying to pray daily, with meaning. I truly enjoy these six Psalms, because each one emphasizes a different aspect of G-d’s magnanimity. But, could you explain why we begin with the verse Ashrei, which is ‘borrowed’ from elsewhere in the book?”

“The Halachah recommends spending some time in quiet meditation, prior to praying (Berachos 30b). This makes it easier to focus on the essence of prayer and what we are trying to accomplish. The source cited for this law is the verse Ashrei, usually translated as ‘Happy is he who dwells in Your house; he will continually be able to praise You.’ I would note that Rabbi Hirsch, a great nineteenth century scholar, explains the word Ashrei a bit differently. According to his explanation, the verse means: ‘He who dwells in Your house is constantly striving forward in his life; providing his life with more meaning.’ Either interpretation emphasizes the importance of not racing into our prayer, but spending time meditating over the smallness of man and the greatness of G-d, before we approach Him with our daily requests.

Pesukei Dezimra Every Day and one’s Concerns will go away.

“My own experience is that involving oneself in Pesukei Dezimra not only helps one daven the entire tefilah on a completely different level, but also rouses one’s sense of bitachon. In David Hamelech’s own words “The G-d of Yisroel told me... the righteous will rule over man; he will prevail through his fear of Hashem” (Shmuel II 23:3).

“In modern Hebrew, bitachon means security or defense; and bituach means insurance. Both of these uses cloud the issue:

Yisrael Betach BaHashem, the Jewish people can trust only in Hashem. Only through arousing our sense of Hashem’s power and providence can we possibly find any comfort. In the words of the Chovos HaLevavos, ‘He who does not trust in Hashem, places his trust in something else.’”

“I certainly identify with this, perhaps more so, since I am so familiar with the way people live ‘out there.’ I find these Psalms extremely powerful.”

Baruch She’amar – A Song of Desire

Ron is ready with his next question: “I notice that while the Pesukei Dezimra contains only Biblical quotes, my Siddur notes no Biblical quotes in the introductory passage.”

“Because these passages are so important and comprise their own special mitzvah of praising G-d, we introduce and conclude with special blessings, just as we recite blessings before and after eating, and before performing mitzvos. The introductory prayer, which begins with the words Baruch She’amar, begins by blessing G-d ‘who said and made,’ a quality unique to Hashem. He both says and performs, whereas all else in the world either orders or acts (Avudraham). Baruch She’amar includes hints to all of Creation, by alluding to the Ten Statements with which Hashem made the world. To quote the Tur (Orach Chayim 51): ‘One must recite Baruch She’amar with song and sweetness, because it is a beautiful and desirous song.’

The concluding blessing of Pesukei Dezimra begins with the word Yishtabach. In order to avoid any interruption between these berachos, one may not interrupt from the time one recites Baruch She’amar until the end of davening (Shulchan Aruch 51:4). The Medrash reports that when the verse speaks of someone ‘who is afraid because he has sinned’, it refers to a person who spoke during Pesukei Dezimra.”

Singing David’s Song will keep us from Steering Wrong

Ron notes that while Baruch She’amar states that we use the songs of David, Your servant, to praise Hashem, not all the verses in Pesukei Dezimra come from Psalms.

“Although a few passages in Pesukei Dezimra are from other authors, the vast majority were written by King David. Even the two sections taken from

Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles) are quotes of King David that appear in those books.

“Among the notable exceptions is the very end of Pesukei Dezimra, where we recite Az Yashir, the Song that the Jewish people sang after miraculously crossing the Red Sea. This epic is considered the song of praise of the Jewish people and, therefore, merits its special place in the daily Pesukei Dezimra. It is singled out as such a special praise that halacha requires one to sing it daily, as if one had personally experienced this miraculous manifestation of G-d’s presence.

“Notwithstanding all its wondrous virtues, there is still some halachic controversy whether it should be recited as part of Pesukei Dezimra or not.” “How so?”

“The Rambam, perhaps the greatest scholar of the last thousand years, mentions the recital of Az Yashir after Yishtabach, not before. Apparently, since King David did not author Az Yashir, the Rambam feels that it should not be included between the two blessings; only passages that are authored by King David should be included. I am personally unaware of any community that currently follows this practice.”

Hodu – Before Baruch She’amar or After?

Ron is ready with his next question: “I have noticed that some congregations begin Pesukei Dezimra with Baruch She’amar, while others begin with a different passage. What is the rationale behind these two different approaches?”

“King David taught this song to be sung on the day that the Aron, which held the Ten Commandments, was brought to the City of David, in the city of Jerusalem (Divrei Hayamim I 16). Later it was sung to accompany the daily offerings in the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, until the Beis Hamikdash was built (Seder Olam, Chapter 14). Thus, this praise is directly associated with the offerings of the Jewish people and, at the same time, it reflects the early history of the Jewish nation.

The question is whether we should recite it as part of the regular Pesukei Dezimra, albeit closer to the part of the prayer when we discuss the offerings, or whether it is a sequel to korbanos and prior to Pesukei Dezimra.

Ashkenazic practice follows the first approach and Sefardic, the latter – two old customs, both cited by early authoritative sources (Tur).”

Pesukei Dezimra: Fulfilling Hashem’s Only Desire

“Could you sum up in a few words what we have learned today?”

“Rather than my words, I will cite a great early scholar, the Ramban: ‘All that Hashem desires from this world is that man should thank Him for creating him, focus on His praise when he prays, and that the community pray together with concentration: Mankind should gather together and thank the Lord who created them, broadcasting: We are your creations!’” (Ramban, Shemos 13:16).

To this, Ron replied: “You just mentioned that the community should recite the praises together. In my visits to different synagogues, I have noticed that in the Sefardic community the entire congregation recites these prayers in unison. In many other synagogues, someone begins and ends each passage aloud, so that everyone can read from the same place. It seems, from your description, that this is the proper way one should recite these prayers.

“However, in some shuls that I frequent, the prayers seem far more chaotic. Although these shuls are, thank G-d, very crowded and well attended, people arrive at different times, and each person starts praying by himself. No one leads the services until after Pesukei Dezimra is complete, and they are certainly not said in unison. I must admit that I do not find this part of the services very attractive. It certainly does not fit the beautiful description you just gave me.”

Yosel shifted uncomfortably, realizing that Ron is absolutely correct. “It is embarrassing to admit that we are not doing what we should,” he began.

“Your criticism is extremely well founded. Would you be willing to come with me and speak to the Rabbi of our congregation about the problem? I admit that the problem has bothered me for a while, but I have not had the gumption to do anything about it. Perhaps you can help me?”

Ron realized that he had turned the tables. He had come as an outsider sharing something that bothered him. He did not expect to be the person Yosel would appeal to for help in what appeared to be some type of crusade. But Yosel’s face indicated that he was sincere in his request. Not knowing the rabbi, Ron was uncertain what to expect, but at the meeting, he found the rabbi more than accommodating.

“I have wanted to introduce this in the shul for a long time,” the rabbi said after listening to their complaint. “The old minhag, in all communities, always included someone leading the services from the very beginning of Berachos. Why and when this practice changed is not for our discussion now, but I would like your help in changing the practice in our shul.”

In Conclusion, the Congregation’s Resolution

Ron became a very active member of the shul, although his attire initially looked fairly dissimilar from that of most other members. His input, as an “outsider”, was happily accepted.

And as Ron morphed into Reuvein and learned how to use the Hebrew Siddur fluently, his unflagging enthusiasm for Pesukei Dezimra spurred major change, not only in himself and in his good friend Yosel, but also in Congregation Bnei Torah. Ultimately, his enthusiasm and initiative spiritually permeated the entire world.