

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

If you seek to understand Judaism's social vision, look at its anti-poverty legislation. "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your G-d is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tight-fisted toward your poor brother. Rather be open-handed and freely lend him sufficient for his needs in that which he lacks. Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your G-d will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land." (Deut 15: 7-11)

Ostensibly the passage is about the cancellation of debts in the seventh year (shemittah, the year of "release"). The oral tradition, however, extended it to the laws of tzedakah-the word usually translated as "charity" but which also means "distributive justice, equity". The rabbis interpreted the phrase "sufficient for his needs" to mean the basic requirements of existence: food, clothing, shelter and so on. "That which he lacks" was understood as referring to a person who was previously wealthy but has now become impoverished. He too must be helped to recover his dignity: "It is related about Hillel the Elder that, for a certain poor man who was of good family, he bought a horse to ride on and a slave to run before him. When on one occasion he could not find a slave to run before the man, he himself ran before him." (Ketubot 67b)

The force of this passage lies in the fact that Hillel himself was notoriously poor, yet he gave of his money and time to help a rich man who had lost his money regain his self-respect.

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Eliyahu Natan Weiss
on the occasion of his bar mitzvah
Eli, we love you & we're very proud of you!
Love, Aba & Ema**

This double aspect is evident throughout the laws of tzedakah. On the one hand, they are directed to the brute fact of poverty. No one must be deprived of basic physical necessities. On the other, they address with astonishing sensitivity the psychology of poverty. It demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, shames. Tzedakah, ruled the rabbis, must be given in such a way as to minimize these feelings: "When Rabbi Yannai saw a certain man giving a coin to a poor person in front of everyone, he said: It would have been better not to have given it to him than to have given it and put him to shame." (Hagigah 5b)

In a famous passage, Maimonides describes the eight levels of charity: "There are eight degrees of charity, one higher than the other. The highest degree, exceeded by none, is that of one who assists a poor person by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment-in a word by putting him in a situation where he can dispense with other people's aid. With reference to such aid it is said, 'You shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you' (Lev. 25: 35), which means: strengthen him in such a manner that his falling into want is prevented.

"A step below this is the one who gives alms to the needy in such a way that the giver does not know to whom he gives and the recipient does not know from whom he takes. This exemplifies doing a good deed for its own sake. One example was the Hall of Secrecy in the Temple, where the righteous would place their gift clandestinely and where poor people from noble families could come and secretly help themselves to aid. Close to this is dropping money in a charity box...

"One step lower is where the giver knows to whom he gives, but the poor person does not know from whom he receives. Thus the great sages would go and secretly put money into poor people's doorways...

"A step lower is the case where the poor person knows from whom he is taking, but the giver does not know to whom he is giving. Thus the great sages would tie coins in their scarves, which they would fling over their shoulders, so that the poor could help themselves without suffering shame.

"Lower than this, is where someone gives the poor person a gift before he asks. Lower still is one who gives only after the poor person asks. Lower than this is one who gives less than is fitting, but does so with a

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friendly countenance. The lowest level is one who gives ungraciously." (Mattenot Ani'im 10: 7-14)

This exquisitely calibrated ethic is shot through with psychological insight. What matters is not only how much you give, but also how you do so. Anonymity in the giving of aid is essential to dignity. The poor must not be embarrassed. The rich must not be allowed to feel superior. We give, not to take pride in our generosity, still less to emphasise the dependency of others, but because we belong to a covenant of human solidarity, and because that is what G-d wants us to do, honouring the trust through which he has temporarily lent us wealth in the first place.

Especially noteworthy is Maimonides' insistence that giving somebody a job, or the means to start a business, is the highest charity of all. What is humiliating about poverty is dependence itself: the feeling of being beholden to others. One of the sharpest expressions of this is to be found in the Grace after Meals, when we say, "We beseech You, G-d our Lord, let us not be in need of the gifts of men or of their loans, but only of Your helping hand... so that we may not be put to shame nor humiliated for ever and ever." The greatest act of tzedakah is one that allows the individual to become self-sufficient. The highest form of charity is one that enables the individual to dispense with charity. From the point of view of the giver, this is one of the least financially demanding forms of giving. It may not cost him anything at all. But from the point of view of the recipient, it is the most dignifying, because it removes the shame of receiving. Humanitarian relief is essential in the short-term, but in the long-run, job creation and economic policies that promote full employment are more important.

One detail of Jewish law is particularly noteworthy: even a person dependent on tzedakah must himself or herself give tzedakah. On the face of it, the rule is absurd. Why give X enough money so that he can give to Y? Giving to Y directly is more logical and efficient. What the rabbis understood, however, is that giving is an essential part of human dignity. The rabbinic insistence that the community provide the poor with enough money so that they themselves can give is a profound insight into the human condition.

Jewry has had many distinguished economists, from David Ricardo (whom Keynes called the greatest mind that ever addressed itself to economics), to John

von Neumann (a physicist who, in his spare time, invented Game Theory), to Paul Samuelson, Milton Friedman and Alan Greenspan. They have won an astonishing 38% of Nobel prizes in the field. Why should this have been so? Perhaps because Jews have long known that economics is one of the fundamental determinants of a society; that economic systems are not written into the structure of the universe, but are constructed by human beings and can be changed by human beings; and thus that poverty is not a fact of nature but can be alleviated, minimized, reduced. Economics is not a religious discipline. It is a secular art and science. Yet, deeply underlying the Jewish passion for economics is a religious imperative:

"There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land." © 2009 Rabbi J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The first word in our portion re-eh is one of the most powerful terms found in the Torah. In fact, G-d is described as a ro-eh on three different levels.

The first time the word is found in the Torah, the Torah states that after creating light or energy, "vayar Elokim ki tov, G-d saw it was good." (Genesis 1:4) Obviously an anthropomorphism. Still, as G-d saw, so do we have the power to see.

On a deeper level, re-eh means to see in the sense of empathizing for the other. Note the description just prior to the deluge in the time of Noah. There the Torah states, "and the Lord saw (vayar Hashem) that the wickedness of man was great on the earth." (Genesis 6:5) This could mean that G-d saw with the sense of feeling the pain and horror which was unfolding-the wickedness of man whom he had created. As G-d felt the pain of humankind, so too should all people created in G-d's image empathize with the other.

There is yet another understanding of ra-ah. Ra-ah could have covenantal connotations-that is G-d seen with an eye on establishing and fulfilling His covenant with His people. Indeed, the first time ra-ah appears after Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah were chosen, the Torah states "and the Lord appeared (veyera) to Avraham and said 'to your seed I will give this land.'" (Genesis 12:7)

Re-eh as used in our portion seems to echo the covenantal approach. Note that when G-d covenantally chooses Avraham, the Torah states, "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you." (Genesis 12:3) Similarly in our portion, the Torah states-"see (re-eh), I have placed before you a blessing and a curse." (Deuteronomy 11:26)

And just as Avraham first built an altar to G-d in Shechem-Elon Moreh (Genesis 12:6) and his rendezvous with G-d reaches a crescendo in

Yerushalayim, (Genesis 12:9) so in our parsha is there discussion of how the blessing and curse would be put forth on Har Gerizim and Har Eyval which are in the area of Shechem. (Deuteronomy 11:29) Not coincidentally, the parsha proceeds to discuss our obligations once we enter the land and come to Yerushalayim. (Deuteronomy 12:1-19)

Thus, ra-ah has a threefold meaning. To see, to empathize, to covenantalize. However, when Avraham and Sarah were chosen, ra-ah was in the context of the promised covenant. G-d was the ro-eh. Here, in our portion, as the Jews prepare to enter Israel, it is in the context of the covenant for the first time soon being realized. Re-eh, therefore, refers to the Jewish people achieving their covenantal mission.

No matter what political leaning, this has been possibly one of the most challenging chapters in the progression of this covenant. However, we must continue to remember that we are fortunate to live in the era of the establishment of the State of Israel, when we are all a bit closer to the covenant's ultimate fulfillment. © 2009 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**ser te'aser," you shall tithe (Devarim 14:22). "Aser bishvil shetisasher," tithe in order that you shall become wealthy (Ta'anis 9a, and other Talmudic era sources, explaining the double-wording). Anyone who has heard an appeal for funds, especially in synagogue, has heard this derasha. If you give money to charity, you'll get much more in return. Not just merits, but a return on your investment. A closer look at the context makes it quite clear precisely what kind of tithe the Torah is talking about. Not the tenth of the field's produce given to the Levi (after terumah has been taken off and given to the Kohain). Not the tithe given to the poor in the 3rd and 6th years of the Shemita cycle. The Torah is describing the tithe taken and brought to Yerushalayim to be eaten there; Ma'aser Sheini. It seems rather odd that the lesson that giving to charity will bring a greater financial return was taught by the type of tithe that isn't given away at all. Instead, the owner eats his own produce (or food bought with money that came from his own produce), as long as he eats it in Yerushalayim. Shouldn't this idea that giving charity will bring wealth have been taught by one of the other categories of tithes? Yes, we learn additional things that apply to the other types of tithes from these verses, from the word "all" (as in "all of the produce from your seeding") and elsewhere, but there must be a reason why this key to financial success was taught here, where the focus is the tithe that is NOT given away.

As far as I can tell, most religious Jews do give at least a tenth of their income. Yet, it would be difficult to say that most religious Jews are wealthy. If the Torah promises that if you give ma'aser you will become wealthy, shouldn't there be a much higher percentage of wealthy synagogue members?

It has been suggested that the term "wealthy" here means the same as it does in Pirkay Avos (4:1), where we are taught, "who is wealthy; whoever is happy with what he has." Aside from the fact that most people, even those that give a tenth of their income to charitable causes, are not satisfied with what they have, the Talmudic sources are quite clear that it means real wealth, not satisfaction. In Shabbos (1:19a), the Talmud asks in what merit those that live in certain areas are wealthy, with the answer being that in Israel it is because they tithe (based on our verse), in Babylon it is because they honor Torah scholars, and elsewhere it is because they honor the Shabbos. In Ta'anis (9a) we are told that giving ma'aser is the one area in which we are allowed to test G-d to see if He will really make us rich, a test that cannot be measured if the issue is how satisfied you are with what you have rather than whether you became wealthy. The Midrash Tanchuma (10/7, quoted by Tosfos in Ta'anis) relates the story of a person who had one field (the implication being that he did not have a lot of land, and he should have had a hard time supporting his family). This field produced 1,000 measures every year, and he gave 100 measures as ma'aser every year, and was able to support his family with the rest. Before he died, he told his son that this one field would support him too, as long as he gave the full 100 measures to ma'aser every year. However, because 100 measures was a lot to give away, every year the son gave less and less, and the field produced less and less, until it only produced the 100 measures that had originally been given away. The Midrash does not discuss how satisfied the father or son were with what was produced, but actual numbers; the more ma'aser given, the more the land produced, the less given, the less it produced. (The Midrash concludes by saying that originally he was the landowner and G-d only took a tenth, but in the end G-d was the landowner and the son only got a tenth.)

What is interesting about the Midrash is that even though it deals with numbers, the father gave 100 measures - one tenth of what was produced - every year, yet it never produced more than 1,000 measures. That was considered a lot for that field, and the 900 measures left for the farmer each year may have been enough to make him "wealthy." But if giving ma'aser increases wealth, wouldn't we have expected the field to produce even more the next year? And, assuming a tenth of the higher output was given as ma'aser that next year, shouldn't the output have kept growing and growing? Why is the only fluctuation down, when less ma'aser was given and the output kept decreasing, and not up if more would have been given?

Later (18/17), when the Tanchuma makes the same derasha as the Talmud ("aser bishvil shetisasher"), it adds three more words, "ad shelo tischaser," so that you should not be missing [anything]. I would posit that when Chazal tell us that if you tithe you will become wealthy, it means that you will reach your full financial potential. This one field, if it produced like most fields of its size, would not have produced much. However, because the owner gave the full ma'aser, it produced the maximum it could produce. When the son decreased the amount given, the full potential was no longer reached; the less ma'aser he gave, the less the field produced. "Wealthy" doesn't necessarily mean living in luxury, but reaching the full potential. This may be more difficult to measure when our income is not based on local agriculture, but those that had not been giving the full amount can see if by giving more ma'aser their income moves closer to its full potential. Nevertheless, wealth being defined as reaching full potential rather than as having an ever-increasing bank account is only one factor.

The very idea of being rewarded with riches runs counter to the notion that G-d helps those who do the right thing do even better things. "And Yeshurun became fat, and kicked" (Devarim 32:15). Becoming "fat" with materialistic riches has, historically, led to moving further away from G-d rather than getting closer to Him. Having too much gold was one of the causes Moshe cited for the golden calf (see Rashi on Devarim 1:1). How can G-d "reward" someone who does the great mitzvah of giving ma'aser by tempting him with riches? If, on the other hand, the individual recognizes that everything G-d gives him should be used to enhance his spiritual journey, and he uses them for that purpose, then additional riches can be a positive, providing more opportunities for spiritual growth.

Giving charity is a great thing, but one can give some of his income away while using the rest of it for material purposes. Having more money to splurge on more materialism would not be a positive thing (from a religious perspective), and is not what G-d had in mind when He promised to give wealth to those that give ma'aser. Therefore, when teaching us to "tithe in order that you shall become wealthy," the Torah did so specifically in the context of a tithe that is consumed by the owner in the performance of a mitzvah. For if wealth is really to be a blessing, it must be used in a way that adds holiness, not detracts from it. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There is an old adage in English usage that "seeing is believing." The Talmud phrased this message as follows: "There is no comparison between hearing about something to actually having seen it." In this week's parsha Moshe tells the Jewish people that the

choices in life are not necessarily always those of faith and belief as much as they are of reality and experience.

The truth of Torah and tradition is indicated in the clear history of the Jewish people and in the reality of its existence and survival. It is said that insanity is the pursuit of a goal by the same methods that have never succeeded before and yet pursuing the same methods over and over again.

The problems of Jewish survival and growth are evident to all, here in Israel and wherever Jews live in the world. Clearly it should be evident to all that Jewish survival and growth is not accomplished by compromising Judaism to fit current political and social correctness, which are societal fads that always shift with time and place.

Simply scanning the debris of the wrecked ideas, ideologies and policies that dominated much of Jewish life over the past two centuries should convince the rational observer that Jews need more Judaism and not less and that the preservation of Jewish values and practices is the key to successful Jewish life and accomplishment.

Seeing the success of tradition and its values in the preservation of the Jewish people against all odds and challenges should make all of us believers. Unfortunately that is still not the case.

The choices that Moshe poses for Israel are very stark - life and death, blessings and curses, immortality and fleeting life. Moshe expects the Jewish people to choose wisely. He bases his hopes on the recollections of the past decades of Jewish life that he has led. Simply by remembering what they already know and have experienced should be /sufficient to guide the Jewish people on the path of wisdom and practicality.

Our generation, having assessed and experienced all of the wrong turns in the road of Jewish history over the more recent past should surely know by now that loyalty to Torah, its scholars and teachers, is the key to our future success. Yet Moshe is aware that the power of freedom of choice and the strength of physical desires are never to be underestimated.

He knows in sadness that the Jewish people will not be realistic in its choices and that it will forget and ignore the lessons of its own history and collective experience. The pull of foreign cultures and overbearing physicality will influence them. Seeing will not be believing. And thus Moshe sets the stage for the bitter prophecies that will yet follow in this book of Dvarim.

The bitter realities of persecution and unreasoning bigotry will awaken Israel to its true state of being and to its continuing mission as being G-d's people. But by having proper sight and practical wisdom a great deal of national pain can certainly be avoided. © 2009 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“You shall smite, yes smite, all of the inhabitants of that city by the sword...and you shall burn entirely with fire the city and all of its spoils to the Lord your G-d, and it shall be an everlasting desolation (tel); it shall not be rebuilt again" (Deut 13:16,17).

The Bible ordains the destruction of an entire city which has been seduced and deceived into practicing idolatry. And, although many sages of the Talmud maintain that such a situation "never was and was never created" (B.T. Sanhedrin), the harsh words nevertheless sear our souls.

What is even more difficult to understand are the concluding words of the Bible regarding this idolatrous and hapless city: "...[And the Lord] shall give you compassion, and He shall be compassionate towards you, and He shall cause you to increase as he has sworn to your forbearers. ... This is because you have hearkened to the voice of the Lord your G-d to observe all of His commandments... to do what is righteous (hayashar) in the eyes of the Lord your G-d" (13:18,19).

Compassion? Righteousness? Are these fitting words to describe such an extreme punishment?

To understand the simple meaning of the Biblical command, it is necessary to explore the actual meaning - and nature of the offense - of idolatry.

The Bible lashes out against idolatry more than any other transgression, and of the fourteen verses that comprise the Decalogue, four of them focus on idolatrous worship, its evils constantly reiterated.

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, in their penetrating study *Idolatry*, cite various commentaries as to why idolatry is presented as so repulsive in the Bible. For Maimonides the sin of idolatry is theological; for the Meiri it was the number of innocent children sacrificed to Moloch, the eating of flesh cruelly torn from living animals, and the wanton sexual orgies associated with the Dionysian rites which so incensed the Lord. Indeed, the Bible seems to support the Meiri position; to give but two examples: "You shall not bow down to their G-ds and you shall not serve them; you shall not act in accordance with their deeds (Exodus 23:24)"... "You shall destroy, yes destroy [the seven indigenous nations of Canaan] lest they teach you to do all the abominations which they do before their G-ds (Deut. 20:17,18)."

The Bible never understood monotheism in terms of faith alone; from the very beginning of G-d's election of Abraham who was commanded to convey to subsequent generations not only belief in one G-d, but rather in a G-d "...whose path it is to do compassionate righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19), belief in ethical

monotheism. Moses asks for a glimpse into the Divine (Ex. 32:18). The Almighty, after explaining that no mortal being can ever truly understand the Ineffable and the Infinite, does grant a partial glimpse: "The Lord, the Lord, is a G-d of Compassion (raham) and freely-giving love, long-suffering, full of lovingkindness, and truth ..." (Ex. 34:6. Even Maimonides suggests that these descriptions, known as the 13 Attributes of the Divine, are not so much theological as anthropological, to teach us mortals-commanded to imitate G-d-precisely how to do so: just as He is Compassionate, you humans must be compassionate, just as He gives love freely, so must you humans...

Hence, the essence of Judaism is not proper intellectual understanding of the Divine, (which is impossible), but rather proper human imitation of the Divine traits, acting towards other human beings the way G-d would have us act, in compassionately righteous and just ways. And so Maimonides concludes his *Guide for the Perplexed*, written at the end of his life, with a citation from Jeremiah:

"Thus says the Lord: But only in this should one glory if he wishes to glory: Learn about and come to know Me. I am the Lord who does lovingkindness, justice and righteous compassion on earth. Only in these do I delight, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:22,23).

From this perspective, only a religion which teaches love of every human being, which demands a system of righteousness and morality, and which preaches a world of peace, can take its rightful place as a religion of ethical monotheism. Islam, for example, has enriched the world with architectural and decorative breakthroughs, glorious poetry, mathematical genius, and philosophical writings influenced by Aristotle. And certainly the Kalami and Sufi interpretations of the Koran, which present jihad as a spiritual struggle, place Islam alongside Judaism and Christianity as a worthy vehicle and noble model for ethical monotheism. Tragically, however, the Jihadism, spawned from Saudi Arabia's brand of Wahhabi Islam, the Al-Qaida culture of homicide-bomber terrorism wreaking worldwide fear and destruction -from Manhattan to Bali- and threatening anyone who is not a Jihad believing Muslim, is the antithesis of ethical monotheism.

George Weigel, a Catholic theologian and distinguished Senior Fellow at the Ethical and Public Policy Center in Washington D.C., cites a definition of Jihadism in his compelling study, *Faith, Reason and the War against Jihadism*: "It is the religiously inspired ideology which teaches that it is the moral obligation of Muslims to employ whatever means are necessary to compel the world's submission to Islam." He also analyzes the theology of Sayyid Qutb (d.1966), who stresses the fact that G-d's one-ness demands universal fealty, that the very existence of a non-Muslim constitutes a threat to the success of Islam and therefore of G-d, and so such an individual must be converted or killed; other religions and modern

secularism are not merely mistaken but are evil, "filth to be expunged." The goal is Global Jihad. Such a perverted "theology" only transmutes true Sufi Moslem monotheism into hateful Wahabi mono-Satanism. The enemy of the free world is not Islam; but it is Jihadism.

Let me return to our Biblical passage regarding the idolatrous city. An army hell-bent upon the destruction of innocent people, whose only sin is to believe differently than they do, enters the category of "...the one who is coming to kill you must be first killed by you." One cannot love the good without hating the evil, 'good' defined as the protection of the innocent and 'evil' as the destruction of the innocent. The only justification for taking a life is in order to protect innocent lives - when taking a life is not only permitted but mandatory. Hence the Bible refers to the destruction of the murderous inhabitants of such a city as an act committed for the sake of righteousness. Just imagine the world today if the United States had not committed its forces to help fight Nazi Germany!

But even the most justified of wars wreaks havoc, collateral damage can never be completely prevented, and the soul of one who takes even a guilty human life must become in some way inured to the inestimable value of human life. Hence some of our Sages determine that such a city's destruction had never been decreed, that the Bible is speaking in theory only. Certainly all other possibilities must be exhausted before taking such a final step of destroying a city.

Nevertheless, the Biblical account - well aware of the moral and ethical ambiguities involved - guarantees that those who fight rank evil will not thereby lose their inner sense of compassion for the suffering of innocent individuals or their over-arching reverence for life. To the contrary, he who is compassionate towards those perpetrating cruelty will end up being cruel towards those who are compassionate. © 2009 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Nesivos Shalom

“Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot, as it is said, 'When you eat of the labor of your hands, you are praiseworthy and all is well with you.' You are praiseworthy in this world, and all is well in the world to come. "

Some questions shouldn't be asked. A question for which everyone has the answer is no question. Do we have any doubt about who is rich? Possessing much money makes a person rich, end of story!

True, remarks Maharal. Money may make a person rich, but money comes and goes. The Mishnah questions whether a person can be essentially rich, rich by his nature, not by dint of something that may evaporate the next day. (Moreover, having money does not seem to slake a person's thirst for more. Chazal point out that to the contrary, the more a person has,

the more he wants. People we routinely call rich, then, are some of the neediest people around.)

More importantly, what a man possesses does not make the man. Looking for person whose essence is rich-a person who never finds himself lacking- is a more daunting task. This is what the Mishnah sets out to do, and finds him in the person who always finds joy and happiness in his portion.

The benefits of such a mind-set are greater than initially apparent. The Sava Kadisha cautioned against seeing this attitude as an isolated midah. To the contrary, he taught, finding happiness in one's lot an all-embracing principle. It produces a cascade of benefits. It brings wondrous change to the heart of a man, and can lead him to teshuvah mei-ahavah. The life of a proper Jew depends on it.

We have to be puzzled about this attitude. Many people lead what objectively looks like lives of travail and sorrow. What is there to be happy about? We can suggest a number of approaches.

The first owes to the Noam Elimelech, who parses the conclusion of the Mishnah's thought in a novel way. "You are praiseworthy in this world, and all is well in the world to come" can be taken to mean that a person is praiseworthy in this world when he translates all experiences and opportunities into their value in gaining Olam Habo. In other words, a person can be happy with his lot, if he has no expectation-and no interest- in any temporal benefit, but stays focused entirely on acquiring his place in the world to come.

The value in this is not simply ascetically shunning all pleasure in this world, but something more subtle. The gemara tells us that before a child is formed, it is ordained whether he will be rich or poor, wise or foolish. The point is that no two people are identical. Hashem gives each individual a unique set of challenges-the best way for him to gain his portion in Olam Habo. For some, the challenge comes from dealing with wealth; for others, the task is dealing with poverty. It would do a person no good at all to switch circumstances with another, because those circumstances are not going to help him gain eternal life. Everyone can be happy in this world because his own peculiar conditions and circumstances will lead to it being well in the world to come.

A different approach dovetails with a teaching of Toras Avos. When a Jew joyfully accepts the way Hashem conducts his life, then Shomayim reacts the same way to him. Measure for measure, the Heavenly courts look upon him kindly; they are happy with him, regardless of the details of his behavior.

Acceptance of the manner in which Hashem shepherds him is hinted at in the Shema. The phrase u-ve-chol me'odecha/with all your might can be seen as-with all your me'ods. In other words, thank Him exceedingly well. With all your "very much," your meod meod, acknowledge Hashem fully and enthusiastically

in each and every measure that He measures out for you.

This approach comes from a different place. It is a tributary of a person's ahavas Hashem. A person who truly loves Hashem will be happy with anything that flows from Him, regardless of whether he understands it or whether it brings him immediate pleasure. (This explains the link between finding joy in one's lot and teshuvah me-ahavah. It is the ahavah itself that allows one to find joy in one's situation, regardless of the circumstances.)

Yet another approach to being mesame'ach bechelko is hinted at in the verse, "Hashem's portion is His people." If we assume the chelko of our Mishnah to mean Hashem's portion, rather than ours, we have a very different reading. Who is rich? The person who understands that he himself is a part of Hashem Above. A person who appreciates that his neshamah comes from a "place" under the kisei ha-kavod, the Throne of Glory, will never surrender to depression or melancholy. Recognizing the sanctity of his neshamah, nothing will disturb him other than a sense of distance from Hashem, and nothing will delight him more than his feeling of closeness and attachment to Him. He will always, however, find satisfaction in knowing the elevated source of his neshamah, the most personal and precious part of himself.

We have shown that finding joy in one's lot is not a simple slogan or aphorism. It includes many wonderful consequences, and takes significant spiritual accomplishment to get there. People who are not quite there find this disconcerting. The key here-as is true of other high levels of ruchniyus that Chazal teach about, like ahavas Hashem-is to realize that it is not the preserve of a privileged few. Everyone can have some portion of it. We are asked to take the first steps; HKBH will help us get as far as we can. © 2007 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein and torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira, Rosh Yeshivat Ramat Gan; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

A person of faith can be thrown off-track fairly easily if he or she does not take the trouble to delve deeply into the faith. Such a person can be "checkmated" in the following three simple moves: (1) One of the basic tenets of faith is that the Almighty is omnipotent. (2) A second basic tenet of faith teaches us that "G-d does good for everybody, and He has pity on all His creatures" [Tehillim 145:9]. The sages explained that His desire to do good is the reason that the Almighty created the world. (3) But if all this is true, why does the world appear to be in such a sorry state?

Every one of us is constantly trying to repair the world in the best way he or she can, and some of us succeed to some degree. But in spite of this the world is

a scene of much suffering, shortcomings, and misfortune, mainly because we do not have the power to fix everything that is wrong. But the Almighty is not limited in any way, and He wants to do good for all the creatures. So why then doesn't He repair the world?

The answer to this dilemma can be seen in the verses that open this week's Torah portion. "See, I present you today with a blessing and a curse. The blessing is relevant if you will listen to the mitzvot of your G-d... and the curse is if you do not listen to your G-d's mitzvot..." [Devarim 11:26-28]. Good and evil in the world depend on human activity, the principle that is known as "reward and punishment." The trick question at the beginning of this article seems to show that there is a contradiction between this principle and G-d's infinite ability to do good for all the creatures, but this reasoning is faulty. "Reward and punishment" is neither a condition for receiving good from the Almighty nor a way to take revenge on somebody who does not fulfill the conditions. We were not created to fulfill the demands, they were created as a tool for us! That is what the sages told us: "Who was created for whom?... Was the Torah not created for Yisrael?" [Kohellet Rabba 1].

If G-d would withhold His good as a way of goading us into doing His will, the question of how this can be reconciled with His good would indeed be a legitimate one. But this is not the way of the real world-good and evil, reward and punishment were created in order to serve us. They give us the opportunity to be partners with G-d as a result of our own choice, our freedom, and our own identity. This is the only reason for evil in the world, and it reveals a great meaning of the existence of good. Bad, as is explained in all the holy books, exists in order to allow us to have free will. This partnership brings us the Divine good in a way that is deeper than any external "free gift" could ever do.

All of this means that the existing world where we spend our time navigating between blessing and curse and between reward and punishment presents us with the most complete way possible for expressing the Divine good, and it reveals to us His unlimited omnipotence. It shows us how evil itself is an instrument of the good. It demonstrates how the descent of the souls and their moving away from the source of the Divine light-where they stood before they were created-was necessary as a preparation for a great ascent that is yet to come. There is indeed no limit to the ability of G-d-He can create the darkest night, just as He can turn night into the brightest day. Dark and light are the same to Him.

The Scent of Elul is in the Air

by Rabbi Michi Yosefi, "Yeshuv Hadaat" Farm

This Shabbat we recite the blessing for the coming new month in order to take note that the month of Elul begins this week. It is written in books about Chassidut that the first day of the month includes all the

aspects of the new month. This Shabbat will remind us that the unique light of Elul is fast approaching.

What is this special light? Our sages have taught us that the days of Elul are "yemei ratzon"-days of favor. Our traditional sources make it clear that this is a time of reconciliation between us and the Almighty, a time to renew the link between us after the distance that resulted from the sin of the Golden calf, when the special relationship that had been formed during the events at Mount Sinai collapsed. But even after such a significant crisis, the Almighty gives us an opportunity to renew our relationship, and that is why Moshe rose up for another forty days and returned with the second set of Tablets. Elul has been sanctified as a time for "ratzon"-literally, the desire of both sides of a conflict to renew the former relationship in spite of everything that has happened. Both sides want to come face to face once again.

There are four types of contact that must be taken into account when attempting to rehabilitate the shattered link. The four different aspects are basically one in that they are all related to the Hebrew root bet-resh-aleph. We must strive for fruitful relationships among the following four factors: The Creator, the creatures, health, and creation.

With respect to the link with the Creator, every one of us is acutely aware of how important this issue can be in such matters as prayer, Torah, and the mitzvot. What is usually not as clear is the need for a link with the creatures-with each and every person who is close to us. This is also a form of relationship with the Creator. It is written in the name of the Baal Shem Tov that the verse "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Vayikra 19:18] is a commentary on the verse "you shall love your G-d" [Devarim 6:5]. By loving a fellow Jew we show a love for the Almighty, since every Jew has some portion of G-d's holiness. By loving a Jew we are also showing love for the Almighty (daily calendar, the twelfth of Av).

The link to health is also very important, since our body is the dwelling place of our soul, the utensil through which we perform our mission in the world. A weakness of our body leads to a weakness in our souls (as is quoted in the name of the Baal Shem Tov and in Orot Hatorah, by Rabbi Kook). Maintaining proper health, cultivating it, and paying attention to health issues is thus not foreign to the concept of maintaining a close relationship with G-d but is rather an important factor in renewing our relationship with Him.

The link to creation means to be able to see the light of G-d in everything that appears in the physical world that He created. When we can see the presence of G-d in everything He created we are recognizing a link between heaven and earth. One cannot be truly linked to the Almighty without being aware of his health, the other creatures, and the entire surrounding creation.

When on this special Shabbat we come to prepare ourselves for the month of Elul, we must first of

all remember that it is a happy time. It is a time of favor, when we repent and show our desire for a renewal of the beloved relationship with the Creator. On Shabbat we can already begin to prepare our hearts with awareness and alertness as the month approaches so that we will be able to renew the desires for contact. One who can set aside some time this Shabbat for a personal discussion with the Almighty (and for seclusion) should use the opportunity in his or her own words to ask that the old simple faith should be renewed, since the truth is that "it is possible to do a repair." It is important, however, not to leave this as a single one-time process but rather to expand the desire and the awareness, leading to the four other dimensions that are discussed above.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Re'eh tells us that "no prophet may advocate idol worship no matter the circumstances. If he does he is considered a false prophet, even if he's able to perform miracles." (Deuteronomy 13:2-6) The obvious question is how can a false prophet have the ability to perform miracles?

Rabbi Akiva (in Talmud Sanhedrin 90a) contends that when the Torah speaks of this prophet performing miracles, the prophet was then a true one. Only later did he defect to the wrong path. Once becoming a false prophet he is no longer able to perform miracles. As Rabbi Avi Weiss extracts, this answer underscores a critical concept in Judaism, especially as the month of Elul, the thirty days of introspection before the High Holidays near: notwithstanding one's achievement or spiritual level there is always the possibility of failing (i.e. false prophet), and an equal possibility of improvement (i.e. Teshuva (repentance) before Rosh Hashana). While the Parsha depicts a prophet that has fallen from grace, rising to grace is just as viable. Just like the prophet, we are judged based on where we are now, and how much we've improved, not on where we once were. © 2009 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states regarding serving the Almighty in the Bais HaMikdosh, the Temple: "And you shall rejoice before the Almighty" (Deut. 12:12).

The Sforno comments "Serve the Almighty with joy-as is befitting everyone who serves Him from love." When a person loves someone he is happy to do any action that will manifest that love. Joy is a by-product of love for the Almighty. Included in the constant commandment of loving the Almighty is the concept of feeling joy whenever you focus on your love for the Almighty! *Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2009 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*