

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Moshe's long oration to the people of Israel enters its final phase in the parsha of Haazinu. Moshe speaks to his generation about to embark on the conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel - and he speaks to all of the later generations of the Jewish people, thousands of years later.

The song of Haazinu represents the full pattern and destiny of Jewish history. And as the two opinions of Midrash and Talmud quoted by Rashi make abundantly clear, the message involved is not localized to the Jewish people alone but it has universal consequences as well.

Anyone familiar with the flow of general human history will immediately recognize that the Jews are disproportionate in their effect upon that history. The world's story is dependant to a great extent on the story of the Jews. Oppressors of Jews continually arise but they are eventually defeated, but only after having caused tremendous damage to the Jews, to their own nations and to the world at large.

The Jews survive, as is promised in the prophecy and song of Haazinu, but in the process of rebuilding Jewish life, new enemies reappear. No one learns anything from past history and events, not the Jews or their enemies - and thus the pattern suggested in the parsha continues almost eternally. And in essence that is the substance of the Torah's warnings against worshipping strange gods. These strange gods have already proven themselves false earlier in history. Yet, they are still worshipped albeit in a "new" nomenclature and garb.

The main question in Jewish history, the one that faces us today, beleaguered and isolated as we feel we are, is how to break this cycle. In the song of Haazinu, Moshe suggests that only a full hearted return to the values and traditions of the covenant between G-d and Israel can end this vicious cycle of hate and destruction.

The rebellion of Jews against G-d's covenant brings with it the rebellion against decency and common sense that reflects itself in the continuance of persecution from the rest of the world. Moshe makes that abundantly clear in his words in the parsha. The truth of the matter is that even though this song of Haazinu is the one that Moshe commands the Jewish

people to commit to memory and to regard as the eternal witness of Jewish history, the Jews have never quite believed Moshe's admonition.

And, we in our time stumble through the fog of current events groping for an innovative way out of our problems. Moshe calls the people of Israel "children who have lost my trust." This is because of the terrible tendency to repeat past errors and to constantly search for the Jewish penchant to adopt the latest cultural and societal fads. Trust is built on wisdom and tenacity. The song of Haazinu provides us with an ample supply of both of these necessary traits that alone will guarantee our future survival and success. © 2011 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 at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“And an angel of the Lord called out to him from the heavens and said... Do not stretch out your hand against the lad..." (Genesis 22:12) .

Every Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), we ponder the story of the Akeda. How can the G-d of love and compassion tell Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac?

Moreover, while G-d Himself commands the sacrifice; it is only an "angel of the Lord" who tells Abraham to stay his hand. Even accepting the explanation that Abraham misunderstood the true intent of His initial words, why is it not G-d Himself who rescinds His demand? And by what right does Abraham listen to the "Angel of the Lord" and reject the original command of G-d Himself? And why does the text stipulate that the angel's later retraction came to Abraham "from the heavens" - a phrase missing from G-d's first command?

In this context, it is interesting to note that in Rembrandt's famous painting of the akedah, the angel not only speaks to Abraham, but actually stays his hand. Apparently, the artist did not think the angel's words alone would have stopped Abraham from obeying the command he had received directly from G-d.

Let us review the awesome story. The G-d of Power and Might who is recognized by the nations

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW@AOL.COM**

The material presented in this publication was collected from email subscriptions, computer archives and various websites. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any synagogue or organization.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
(973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW@AOL.COM**

commands Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Father and son set out on a three-day journey; not a word passes between them until they come within sight of the designated place of Divine Service. At that point, Abraham places the sacrificial wood on Isaac's back, takes the knife and the fire, and father and son walk "together" to the appointed destination.

What must have gone through Isaac's mind? We can only imagine how fearful his thoughts were from the question he finally manages to ask: "Here are the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for the whole burnt-offering?" Abraham provides a non-committal response which can be understood in a variety of ways: "G-d will provide for Himself the whole burnt offering - my son; and the two of them walked together" (Genesis 22:7, 8).

And what may have gone through Abraham's mind? Rabbi Joseph Ibn Kaspi suggests that perhaps Abraham was expecting G-d's command to sacrifice Isaac. After all, Abraham lived in the idolatrous period of Moloch, when the crowning proof of fealty to one's idol was to offer it one's most beloved child.

At the same time, however, Abraham was told by YHVH (the special name for the G-d of Israel), that he was chosen for a covenantal relationship precisely because of his "compassionate righteousness and moral justice" (Gen. 18:17-19), and that it was this unique teaching that would bring blessing to "all the families of the earth." Moreover, Abraham certainly knew the pillar of the Noahide laws: "If a human sheds the blood of another, his blood shall be shed, for humans were made in the image of G-d" (Gen. 9:5). It was these fundamental teachings that caused Abraham to remonstrate with G-d on behalf of any innocent people in Sodom, and these basic principles must have raised agonizing doubts in Abraham's mind during the journey: Perhaps he hadn't understood G-d correctly. Perhaps he had given the divine command a Molochian interpretation; perhaps YHVH did not want him to slaughter Isaac after all...

At the critical moment, Abraham decides to reject his interpretation of G-d's command and listen to the "angel of YHVH" - to the divine words of "humanity created in G-d's image" and "compassionate righteousness and moral justice" which he understands to be his covenantal message and mission. These

concepts came from heaven, no less (and perhaps more) than the command which he may have misunderstood.

And so it is that after the akeda the same "angel of YHVH comes a second time from heaven" to bless Abraham as well as the entire world through Abraham's seed. This blessing is normally attributed to the fact that Abraham did not withhold (hasach) his son. But the word hasach can also mean "to remove," so I understand that the blessing came because Abraham did not slaughter his only son, and because "he listened to the voice of the angel." The angel is confirming that Abraham did right in abiding by fundamental biblical morality. © 2011 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG

TorahWeb

The upcoming Yomim Noraim, Days of Awe, evoke fear of Hashem and His judgment. Rosh Hashana is the day that every person passes before Hashem individually (Rosh Hashana 18a). The dramatic Unesaneh Tokef, recited with great intensity and devotion, speaks of fear and trembling in the face of the Divine verdict of life and death. This universal theme is the central motif of the "sanctity of the day" on Rosh Hashana: Hashem is the King of the entire world, and all will recognize His sovereignty when He will appear with the splendor of His strength.

The shofar awakens us to teshuvah, primarily out of fear of Hashem and His judgment (Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva 3:4). Yom Kippur emphasizes the need for complete atonement. Just as a mikve purifies the impure, so Hashem purifies Am Yisrael (Yoma 85b). Just as a mikve requires total immersion, Yom Kippur requires total teshuva. Teshuva out of fear is incomplete, a step towards Hashem, and only mitigates one's sins. Yom Kippur is a day of total teshuva, out of love, that converts sins into merits and reaches all the way to Hashem.

Heartfelt confession, conspicuously absent on Rosh Hashana, is the central theme of Yom Kippur. It reflects a sincere recognition of one's mistakes, recited out of love of Hashem and a resolve to improve, which is a meritorious result of the sins.

While Rosh Hashana is the universal day of judgment, Yom Kippur is a special gift to Am Yisrael. "You gave us with love this Day of Atonement so that we can return to You wholeheartedly" (Ne'ilah). "In Your abundant mercy, You have given us this fast day of atonement" (Musaf). Hashem's love of Am Yisrael in granting us Yom Kippur is reflected by our complete teshuva out of love.

Fear is praiseworthy only with respect to Hashem. Fear of Hashem should remove fear of man (Berachos 60a; Rabbeinu Bechaye, Introduction to Ki Sisa;

Al Hateshuva p. 140-141). Love, on the other hand, is praiseworthy with respect to man, as well. A sincere Torah scholar is praised as one who loves Hashem and who loves His creatures (beriyos) (Avos 6:1).

On Rosh Hashana, the day of fear, we, as individuals, beseech Hashem for a good year and declare His kingship. On Yom Kippur, the day of love, we add the dimension of interpersonal forgiveness and closeness. It is a day of no jealousy, hatred or competition (Musaf), when even sinners pray with us (Kol Nidrei) and fast with us (Kerisos 6b).

Rosh Hashana is a day of truth, as we end its central beracha, "purify our hearts to serve You in truth, for You are the Lord of truth and Your word is true." Yom Kippur is a day of peace, as we make amends for our misdeeds and seek and grant forgiveness to foster peace with others.

On every holiday, we implore "bring us to Yerushalayim in eternal joy." On the Yomim Noraim, we add a prayer for "joy in Your city" and for Hashem's rule in "Yerushalayim Your holy city." On Rosh Hashana, we cite the prophecy that all will return from exile and "will bow to Hashem on the holy mountain in Yerushalayim" and on Yom Kippur we recall and anticipate the service of the Kohen Gadol in the Beis Hamikdash in Yerushalayim.

How and when will Yerushalayim be rebuilt? Hashem promises to convert fasts into feasts of joy and gladness, when the Beis Hamikdash will be rebuilt, if only we love truth and peace (Zechariah 8:19, R.H. 18b, see Rabbeinu Chananel). The very themes of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur hold the key to our ultimate redemption.

Indeed, the very name Yerushalayim reflects this duality. The Midrash (Bereishis Rabba 56:16) teaches that Shem called the city "Shalem" (Bereishis 14:18, see Rashi) and Avraham called it "Yireh." Hashem combined both names and called the city Yerushalayim.

The Meshech Chochma (22:14) explains that Shem saw that theft filled the world (6:11) and led to its destruction (6:13). Therefore, he devoted himself to improving interpersonal behavior. As such, he called his capital Shalem to emphasize character perfection and the idea that all of mankind comprise one organic whole, each person influencing and being influenced by one another.

Avraham, on the other hand, fought to teach mankind that Hashem is the Master of the world, a basic fact that had been forgotten (Rambam Hilchos Avodah Zara 1:1-3). To emphasize this message, he called his capital, the site of the akeidah which demonstrated his fear of Hashem (22:12), "Hashem will see...and on the mountain Hashem will be seen" (22:14).

Rosh Hashana, on which we read of the akeidah, and Yom Kippur, when we must appease others, improving our interpersonal behavior to achieve atonement (Yoma 85b), follow immediately the seven weeks of consolation. In the seven haftoras of consolation, Yeshaya describes our glorious future.

"All your children will be students of Hashem and abundant will be your children's peace" (54:13). The two aspects of Yerushalayim, recognizing Hashem and achieving peace, will lead to its redemption.

In the previous pasuk (54:12), Hashem promises to rebuild Yerushalayim with a stone called "kadhchod." The Gemara (Bava Basra 75a) interprets that the angels (see Netzach Yisrael 51) or the scholars (see Shev Denechemta) debated if the stones should be shoham or yashfeh. Hashem said to them, "Let it be both" (kedein ukedein). Hence the word "kadchod," representing both stones.

The Meshech Chochma (Shemos 28:9) notes that shoham stones adorned the efod. This garment of the Kohen Gadol atones for idolatry (Zevachim 88b). The shoham represents its opposite, knowledge and fear of Hashem.

Yashfeh was the final stone of the choshen (28:20). The choshen mishpat (28:15), as its name implies, represents justice, interpersonal propriety. Yerushalayim will be rebuilt when both the themes of its name will be fulfilled. The two stones, shoham of the efod and yashfeh of the choshen, parallel Yireh and Shalem, truth and peace, respectively. When we love and pursue both, Hashem will rebuild Yerushalayim with both stones. All of Am Yisrael will be students of Hashem, bein adam l'adam, and will be blessed with abundant peace, bein adam l'achaveiro.

The Yefe To'ar asks, why does Yireh precede Shalem? Chronologically, Shem preceded Avraham, so Shalem should precede Yireh. He answers that Avraham was a greater tzaddik, so his name, Yireh, takes precedence.

Alternatively, Yireh precedes Shalem conceptually. First we must establish our faith in Hashem and our adherence to the Torah's religious principles and observances. Only then can we develop appropriate interpersonal relationships, guided, and limited, by yiras Shamayim. Fear must precede love, truth must precede peace. Yireh must precede Shalem, even as Rosh Hashana must precede Yom Kippur.

May our teshuva, out of fear and love, lead to a year of truth and peace, and to the rebuilding of Yerushalayim. © 2011 Rabbi M. Willig & torahweb.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The central theme of Yom Kippur is teshuva, commonly translated as "repentance." We hear so much about this term, but what, in fact does it truly mean?

On the simplest behavioral level, writes Maimonides, teshuvah involves "returning" to a situation in which one had previously failed, and not making the same mistake a second time. (Laws of Repentance 2:1) It means being given a second chance. No wonder, Yom Kippur has elements of joy. We celebrate being given a second chance. In too many of life's pursuits, we are given only one shot. If we miss, it's all over. On Yom Kippur, G-d says, "no matter if you have failed before; you can still return."

A chassid once asked his rebbe, "why pray on Yom Kippur, after all, we'll inevitably sin again." In response, the rebbe asked him to look out the window behind him. Outside was a toddler learning to walk. "What do you see?" asked the master. "A child, standing and falling," replied the disciple. Day after day the chassid returned to witness the same scene. At the week's end, the child stood and didn't fall. The child's eyes expressed the achievement of having attained the impossible. "So with us," said the rebbe. "We may fail again and again, but in the end, a loving G-d gives us the opportunities we need to succeed."

The mystics understand teshuvah differently. For them, teshuvah means "returning," to being righteous. But suppose one has never been righteous, what does one return to? Says the Sefat Emet, the soul of every person is fundamentally righteous. There may be a layer of evil obscuring the inner being, but all people created in the image of G-d are inherently good. Teshuvah then, means to return to the inner kernel of goodness we all possess. And so, we sing, and dance on Yom Kippur. We celebrate the opportunity to discover our true selves.

Another classic story. Reb Zusha was on his death bed, and tears were streaming down his face. "Why are you crying?" asked his disciples. "If G-d asks me why I wasn't like Moses or Maimonides," answered Reb Zusha, "I'll say, I wasn't blessed with that kind of leadership ability and wisdom." But I'm afraid of another question," continued Reb Zusha, "what if G-d asks, 'Reb Zusha, why weren't you like Reb Zusha? Why didn't you find your inner being and realize your inner potential? Why didn't you find yourself?' That is why I am crying."

A third approach. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, among many other thinkers, understands teshuvah to mean "answer." That is to say teshuvah is a dialogue. On Yom Kippur we stand before G-d, a caring G-d who asks the question(s). We offer the answer(s). A G-d of love seeks us out. As much as we are in search of Him, He is in search of us. A comforting thought on Yom Kippur.

Yet another chassidic legend. A young girl came to the Ba'al Shem Tov - the father of chassidism - crying. "Why do you cry?" the rebbe lovingly asked. "I was playing hide and seek," said the young girl, "but no one came looking for me." "So, too, is it with G-d,"

reflected the Ba'al Shem Tov. "He, too, is crying. For as much as He is looking for us, we rarely look for Him."

It was left for Rav Avraham Yitzchak ha-Cohen Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel to offer an understanding related to the establishment of the modern State of Israel. Teshuvah, according to Rav Kook, ought be understood eschatologically. It quite literally means "go home," to our homeland. It is not only an individual quest, but a communal mandate to establish a land that is different from all others. A land that is a light to the nations of the world: a land that marks the dawn of redemption, a land at peace. On this Yom Kippur - let it be, let it be. ©2011 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School - the Modern and Open Orthodox Rabbinical School. He is Senior Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, a Modern and Open Orthodox congregation of 850 families. He is also National President of AMCHA - the Coalition for Jewish Concerns.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"Dip the apple, in the honey, make a b'racha (blessing) loud and clear; l'shana tovah um'suka, have a happy, sweet new year." Sometimes there seems to be a fine line between superstition and religious custom. Can eating an improvised candied apple really affect how "sweet" our "new year" will be? The same is true of the entire series of simanim (signs) that most traditional homes undertake (including putting honey on challah) before eating their regular holiday meal. Are we teaching our children to be superstitious by eating foods that have names we can twist into our most fervent hopes and wishes? What is the purpose of this widespread custom, and what is it supposed to accomplish?

A similar issue is raised by Ralbag in his discussion about Moshe's prayer for the nation after the sin of the golden calf, asking how prayer can help; either the punishment is deserved, or it is not deserved. This question is especially pertinent to Moshe's prayer, since Moshe was the one doing the praying even though he wasn't the one deserving of the punishment, but it applies to those praying for themselves as well. For example, asking G-d for additional income would be a normal, and appropriate, prayer to make. However, if the person making the request deserved the additional income, wouldn't G-d provide it even without the prayer? If the additional income is not deserved, how would asking for it change anything? Is offering a prayer and hoping it will be answered that different from eating a vegetable with a name that sounds like the word for "rip" and hoping that any bad decrees (or bad aspects of decrees) will be ripped up?

There are numerous answers given to Ralbag's question about prayer (by Ralbag and others), such as that the act of praying itself takes us to a higher level and thereby more deserving than before the prayer was made. One of the answers given by Ralbag is that verbalizing the things we want leads to doing things that can make us worthy of those things. Taken from this perspective, dipping a sweet apple into sweet honey (and offering a short prayer that G-d should give us a good, sweet year) causes us to take note of the fact that we want a good, sweet year, which in turn causes us to think about what we can do to merit having a good sweet year. Just as empty prayers have little affect, eating a sweetened apple without using it as a springboard for self-improvement (or community involvement that leads to an improved community) will have a greater impact on our waistline than on the heavenly decrees issued on Rosh Hashanah.

This is how Meiri seems to understand the purpose of the simanim, telling us (Horayos 12a) that the reason we put things like gourd, leek, beets and dates on our table on Rosh Hashanah is to "awaken the heart for positive things." The short prayers we say over them, pointing us towards repentance, were added to make sure we don't think we are doing this for superstitious reasons, G-d forbid. There would seem to be no need to actually eat these items, just to have them on the table to remind us of what we want/need, consistent with the wording of the Talmud in Horayos (12a), which quotes Abaye as saying "one should make it a habit on Rosh Hashanah to see gourd, fenugreek, leek, beets and dates." Sh'lah (Rosh Hashanah, Ner Mitzvah) also explains these customs as being a vehicle to lead us towards repentance, but adds that eating them concretizes the concept, making it more likely that it will come to fruition (see Chayei Udum 139:6 for a similar thought; it would be difficult to understand how these customs could affect how we're judged before the judgment is actually made if the purpose wasn't to help us initiate changes that lead to a more favorable judgment). The idea that eating these items help is consistent with the wording of the Talmud in K'risus (6a), where Abaye is quoted as saying "one should make it a habit on Rosh Hashanah to eat gourd, fenugreek, leek, beets and dates."

Chachmas Sh'lomo (O"C 583) doesn't understand why a custom would be instituted that revolves around praying for a good year at mealtime, rather than during the time (and place) when (and where) prayers are usually said. I'm not sure why this is a problem, since we include prayers in the thanks we give G-d for the food after we've eaten; Rosh Hashanah would seem like the perfect time to add prayers during the meal as well. Nevertheless, Chachmas Sh'lomo explains these customs to be a means of expressing our confidence that things will turn out fine, as in the merit of showing confidence in

G-d, G-d will reward our confidence by making sure things really do turn out well.

The Vilna Gaon (O"C 583), after quoting earlier sources who say that on Rosh Hashanah we eat special and sweet foods so that the coming year should have those same qualities, references a Biblical verse (Nechemya 8:10) where Nechemya and Ezra tells the Jewish nation to "go eat special foods and drink sweet things," implying that the concept of eating things that indicate having a good year are based on and/or consistent with the instructions these Jewish leaders gave the nation on Rosh Hashanah. However, the context of these instructions give them an entirely different meaning. The people gathered had just returned from the Babylonian exile, and Ezra read the Torah to them (8:1-8). Upon hearing what G-d had expected of them and realizing how far short they fell from this, they started to cry (8:9, see Rashi). In response to this, Nechemya and Ezra (and the other Jewish leaders) told them "not to mourn, and not to cry" (8:9). It was Rosh Hashanah, a "holy day for our Master (G-d)" (8:10), so they "shouldn't be sad, for rejoicing in G-d is your strength" (ibid). It is quite clear that the purpose of the instructions was to change the mood of the people from one of sadness and mourning to one of joy and celebration, as this is the appropriate way to "celebrate" Rosh Hashanah. Commentators have been puzzled as to why the Vilna Gaon references the verse in Nechemya, which is about celebrating a holiday properly, when discussing the customs that relate to the decrees issued on Rosh Hashanah. What does one have to do with the other?

The discussion that led Abaye to say that we should institute these customs (or to validate already existing customs) was about what to do when nervous about what might happen. For example, if someone wants to know if they will live out the year, he should light a candle (with enough fuel) and place it in a room where the wind doesn't blow (so drafts cannot blow out the candle) for the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; if the candle stays lit, he can be confident he will live out the year. Although most understand the connection between these "tests" and the customs recommended by Abaye to be that allowing the former means it's not considered superstition, thereby making the latter permissible as well, I think the connection is deeper than that. The "tests" were done to help alleviate the concerns of a person who was afraid he would die that year (or would be unsuccessful at a new business venture, or wouldn't return from a trip he was about to take), and Abaye understood from their permissibility that we should try to alleviate the concerns of those who are nervous about what the future holds. Since the decrees issued on Rosh Hashanah are a cause for much concern, Abaye recommended doing things to help calm our nerves.

Throughout history we have been targeted by many enemies, and the constant fear of attack becomes more acute when what will happen in the coming year is being decided in heaven. These fears and concerns also apply to other aspects of our lives, including personal health, the well-being of our family, and our ability to pay the bills. It can be very difficult to feel the necessary joy on Rosh Hashanah with so much hanging in the balance; in order to restore our confidence that everything will be all right, thereby allowing us to celebrate the holiday properly, these customs were instituted. The Vilna Gaon references Ezra and Nechemya telling the nation to celebrate the holiday rather than crying over their deeds in order to illustrate how important it is to be able to celebrate Rosh Hashanah in a festive way; Abaye's recommendations were designed to accomplish the same thing.

Pretending everything will be alright may be ostrich-like, but knowing that it's up to us to make sure things will be alright-by doing what's right and changing what's wrong-can give us the strength and confidence to keep fighting the good fight. Abaye therefore recommended that we do things that will inspire our confidence that things will be okay, as long as we live a life that makes us worthy of G-d's blessings and protection. We wish each other a "Happy New Year" even though we can't be sure it will be, but we ask G-d to grant us a "sweet new year" knowing that if we do our part, He will make it so. © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This Wednesday evening begins the two day holiday of Rosh Hashana-the Day of Judgment. Let's try to get a better understanding of this judgment on Rosh Hashana and then move on to some practical ways to ready ourselves for this holy day.

Rav Kruspdai taught that three books are opened on Rosh Hashana; one for the wicked, one for the righteous and one for those in-between. The righteous are immediately written and sealed for life while the wicked are immediately written and sealed for death. Those in-between are left 'hanging' until Yom Kippur {the Day of Atonement} -- if they merit, they are inscribed for life, if they don't, they are inscribed for death.

The Tosafos there challenges this statement with the question that I imagine is bothering most of us. Many people who seem to be quite righteous don't live out the year. Their death reveals to us that at the previous Rosh Hashana these righteous were inscribed for death. At the same time, people such as Saddam Hussein seem to make it from Rosh Hashana to Rosh Hashana, astonishingly inscribed for life year after year...

The Tosafos explains that the death of the wicked and the life of the righteous that is mentioned in this statement refers to life in the World to Come.

At first glance this seems to be very strange. The judgment of a person's status in the World to Come takes place, not on Rosh Hashana but rather, after death. Only at that point can the life in its entirety be assessed and judged. Furthermore, even if we'll say that the judgment does take place on Rosh Hashana, why is there a need for a person to be judged every Rosh Hashana? Only on the final Rosh Hashana of a person's lifetime should the judgment take place. Then, after death, there can be another judgment on what might have transpired between that last Rosh Hashana and the time that the person's soul returned to its Maker.

The Sifsei Chaim explains in the following manner, based on the Ramcha"l and the Gr"a. The judgment of Rosh Hashana establishes the spiritual state and standing of a person. Is he a person who, through his actions, is ultimately heading for the World to Come? That is the world of eternal life. Such a person is inscribed for life. One who is not heading in that direction is inscribed for death. Once that has been determined on Rosh Hashana, then the specific judgment of what will befall him that particular year will be determined accordingly.

Tranquillity and riches might be served to a person who was inscribed for death in order that he'll be properly compensated for any good that he did perform in this world. Similarly, hardships might befall a person inscribed for life thereby cleansing him of any transgressions committed in this world, clearing the path for his eternity.

At the same time, one who has been inscribed for life might not need the 'jolt' given by difficulties and his judgment for that year might be one of tranquillity and riches. One who has been inscribed for death might need the shock of a tragedy in order to shake him out of his stupor and force him to reassess his priorities and lifestyle.

With this understanding of the seriousness and the far reaching implications of this judgment, what can one do to try improve their chances for a positive judgment?

Rav Chaim Shmuelovitz zt"l offers some advice. The Talmud [Rosh Hashana 17A] teaches that one who is "ma'aveer ol midosov" {willing to overlook it when he's been wronged} has his transgressions overlooked. Rashi there explains that the Attribute of Justice doesn't scrutinize such people or their actions. The 'mirror in the sky' reflects onto us the way that we treat others.

The Talmud there continues with the story of Rav Huna who had nearly died but then rejoined the living. Upon being asked what he had witnessed while being in that state he explained that although the

decree was that he should die, Hashem Himself had interceded and granted him more life in the merit of his having been a "ma'aveer ol midosov."

If being "ma'aveer ol midosov" can bring a person back to life, it will certainly help a person to be inscribed for life.

Another idea, based on this same concept, is that in order for us to expect Hashem to have compassion on us, we must be compassionate to others. By our viewing others as Hashem's children and creations and showing them the compassion that they deserve, we can thereby 'earn' Hashem's compassion.

Those two ideas were demonstrated brilliantly by Rabi Yosi ben Yoezer as he was being led out on a horse to be executed. His irreverent nephew approached him, riding a horse on the Sabbath, and taunted him saying, "look at the horse that my master gives to me and look at the horse that your Master gives to you!"

Rabi Yosi overlooked the incredible audacity of this nephew taunting him at such a time and focused all of his compassionate thoughts on utilizing this opportunity to influence him. He turned to his nephew and said, "if Hashem does that for those who anger Him, imagine what will be done for those who fulfill His will."

His stunned nephew responded, "is there anyone who fulfilled Hashem's will more than you?"

Rabi Yosi then moved in for the kill. "If Hashem punishes the wrongs of those who fulfill His will, imagine what will be done to those who anger Him." The words found their mark, entering this nephew like the venom of a snake. He repented completely and entered the World to Come even before his uncle, Rabi Yosi.

Good Shabbos and a Shana Tova. May you be inscribed in the Book of Life and be blessed with a year of happiness, growth, and tranquillity. © 2011 Rabbi Y. Cinter & torah.org

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah quite appropriately focuses on teshuvah- repentance. In the previous verses, the prophet Hoshea strongly rebukes the Jewish people for straying after practices of idolatry. He predicts terrible tragedies for the Jewish nation because of their atrocious behavior towards Hashem. Hoshea concludes his harsh words by saying, "Shomron will be put to shame because she rebelled against Hashem; they will fall by the sword with her sucklings and pregnant women split open." (14:1) But, Hoshea then invites the Jewish people to return and promises them in return all the blessings of Hashem.

Hoshea quotes Hashem saying, "I will heal them from their rebelliousness and love them through My generosity because My anger has turned away from

them." (14:6) Metzudos Dovid sees in this passage the revelation of one of Hashem's unbelievable merciful attributes. Although the Jewish nation had been heavily involved in sin, one act of repentance would undo all wrong. The prophet describes the process of repentance in the following words, "Take along words and return to Hashem, say to Him 'Remove all sin and grab hold of goodness and we will replace bullocks with our lips of confession.' (14:3)

Hoshea says that Hashem requires one act of them, confession. Repentance for them means a sincere statement of recognition that they have strayed and will not continue doing so. One statement which reflects a sincere desire for Hashem to remove sinful practices from them will fulfill all requirements.

But, Hashem adds an unbelievable dimension to this and concludes, "I will love them out of generosity." 'This', says Metzudos, indicates Hashem's commitment to completely erase their wrong from His mind. Once they repent with sincerity, their past is non-existent. Furthermore, Hashem will increase His love for them in proportions that were never seen before. Although they have no new good track record to show, Hashem accepts their pledge and responds with perfect faith, showering them with love.

This mirrors the beautiful words of Rambam regarding one's relationship with Hashem after repenting. Rambam says, "How great is the merit of repentance! Yesterday one was separated from Hashem and today, after repenting, one merits to cleave to the Divine Presence. Today, one does Mitzvos which are pleasantly and happily accepted and Hashem even craves for them!" (Hilchos Teshuva 7:7)

However, Rambam adds a significant requirement to the Teshuva process. In addition to ones regret over sin and his conviction never to repeat such acts, one must bring Hashem to testify to the sincerity of this conviction. (Hilchos Teshuva 2:2) Apparently, even the Teshuva process can have different degrees of commitment but we are required to make our statement with perfect sincerity. During our confession we must feel-from the bottom of our heart-that we will not return to our shameful, sinful ways. The extent of this is reflected through our willingness to look Hashem "straight in the face" and declare to Him our sincere commitment. The source of Rambam's words is our haftorah wherein it states, "Take with you words of repentance and say to Hashem... we will never again declare a status of deity to our hands' craftwork." (14:4) Yes, true repentance includes an affirmative statement directly to Hashem that we will never return to our sinful ways. (see commentary to Kesef Mishna to Rambam ibid.) The Jewish people had been involved in serious levels of idolatry and their repentance included an affirmation said directly to Hashem that they would never repeat that sin.

Meirei in his masterful work on repentance sensitizes us to the realistic demand this places upon us. Using the analogy of a beautiful garden now covered by weeds, Meirei warns us of a potential shortcoming in the Teshuva process. In order to clear the garden of the weeds, the uneducated gardener removed every one of them by mowing them down to ground level. For a few weeks his fields was cured of its problem. However, shortly thereafter, the weeds began reappearing. Upon consultation he discovered that weed removal required uprooting the weeds from their source and not merely cutting away their exposed section. In this same manner one must search deeply into his heart to determine the source of his wrong doing. Then, and only then, can he say with some degree of sincerity that he will do his utmost to secure that his wrongful actions will never be repeated.

This idea is alluded to by the commentary of Nachmanides in this week's parsha (Devarim 31:21) In upcoming Parshas Ha'azeinu, the Torah foretells that the Jewish people will engage themselves in very sinful practices and Hashem will respond in very serious measures. Eventually Hashem will redeem His people and bring the world to its perfect state. Nachmanides questions the nature of such prophecy. Generally, the Torah predicts that misfortune will follow if the Jewish people act in sinful ways and blessing if they act in a proper way. We never find the Torah stating as a fact that the Jewish people will definitely follow a sinful course. How then can the Torah make this prediction here?

Nachmanides responds with an insightful comment to this week's parsha. Hashem says, "Because I know what your evil inclination does today before I bring you into the promised land." (ad loc.) Nachmanides sees in this passage the answer to his puzzling question. He explains that the exposure of the Jewish people's imperfect conduct thus far is a clear indication of their future actions. The inception of the Jewish people is happening now and all imperfections in their character will inevitably expose themselves in the future. Although no specific generation will necessarily fall into sin, sinfulness will inevitably occur at some point. In essence, an imperfect seed cannot produce a perfect tree.

These ten days of repentance are the incubating period for all our actions



during the year. The basic nature we possess now will inevitably expose itself throughout the year. Viewing character traits as the root of all our actions it is imperative that we address these traits and direct them towards perfection. (see Vilna Gaon on Mishle) If we attack the problem at its root, we stand a fighting chance to rectify it in the future. Only with this approach can we readily bring Hashem to testify to our sincerity of rectifying our sinful ways. When He gazes into our souls He will now see the purity of intent in them with a sincere commitment to follow a perfect path.

Such repentance is readily accepted by our merciful Creator and, in response to this sincere pledge, Hashem erases the past and pleasantly accepts our service and even craves for it! May we merit to attain this level of sincerity which ultimately yielding Hashem's desire and interest in all of our service. © 2011 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI YAAKOV MENKEN

Lifeline

A few days ago, I was invited to a local gathering in memory of David (Moshe Yosef) Reichenberg, who gave his life trying to rescue a child from electrocution during the Hurricane. Rabbi Naftoli Reich, of Ohr Somayach, shared a thought that has a lot of relevance to the days ahead.

In last week's Torah reading, Moshe says that everyone is there, even "from the wood-choppers to the drawers of water." Rashi explains that there were Canaanites who turned away from their wickedness and wanted to convert, hiding their identity. So Moshe accepted them, but made them the wood-choppers and water-drawers.

The question must be asked though, what difference did it make that Moshe gave them menial work to do? If they came from wicked nations, how could he make them part of the Jewish people?

The answer Rabbi Reich shared with us is that they were put to work doing these things on behalf of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle in the desert. And a person can't work on behalf of holiness like that, exerting him or herself, and fail to be transformed in the process.

We are at the time of the year where we are asked to set aside a few days to exert ourselves entirely to the task of coming closer to G-d, of shedding what we did wrong last year and committing to a better new year ahead. Many people worry that they will go through the process, and simply go back to their old ways afterwards. The Canaanite wood-choppers teach us: if you devote yourself entirely to holiness, you can't fail to be transformed! © 2011 Rabbi Y. Menken & Project Genesis, Inc.