

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

By now Moses had given 612 commands to the Israelites. But there was one further instruction he still had to give, the last of his life, the final mitzvah in the Torah: "Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel." (Deut. 31:19)

The oral tradition understood this to be a command that each Israelite should take part in the writing of a Sefer Torah. Here is how Maimonides states the law: "Every male Israelite is commanded to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it says, 'Now therefore write this song,' meaning, 'Write for yourselves [a complete copy of] the Torah that contains this song,' since we do not write isolated passages of the Torah [but only a complete scroll]. Even if one has inherited a Torah scroll from his parents, nonetheless it is a mitzvah to write one for oneself, and one who does so is as if he had received [the Torah] from Mount Sinai. One who does not know how to write a scroll may engage [a scribe] to do it for him, and whoever corrects even one letter is as if he has written a whole scroll." (Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah 7:1)

There is something poetic in the fact that Moses left this law until the last. For it was as if he were saying to the next generation, and all future generations: "Do not think it is enough to be able to say, My ancestors received the Torah from Moses. You must take it and make it new in every generation." And so Jews did.

The Koran calls Jews "the people of the Book." That is a great understatement. The whole of Judaism is an extended love story between a people and a book-between Jews and the Torah. Never has a people loved and honoured a book more. They read it, studied it, argued with it, lived it. In its presence they stood as if it were a king. On Simchat Torah, they danced with it as if it were a bride. If, G-d forbid, it fell, they fasted. If one

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
in loving memory of my dear parents
Chayim Yitchak ben Yehudo Hakoken
Paul Kahn
and Mirjam bas Hachover R'Yehoshua
Irma Kahn-Goldschmidt
by Fernand Kahn

was no longer fit for use it was buried as if it were a relative that had died.

For a thousand years they wrote commentaries to it in the form of the rest of Tenakh (there were a thousand years between Moses and Malachi, the last of the prophets, and in the very last chapter of the prophetic books Malachi says, "Remember the Torah of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel"). Then for another thousand years, between the last of the prophets and the closure of the Babylonian Talmud, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries in the form of the documents-Midrash, Mishnah and Gemarra-of the Oral Law. Then for a further thousand years, from the Gaonim to the Rishonim to the Acharonim, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries to the commentaries, in the form of biblical exegesis, law codes and works of philosophy. Until the modern age virtually every Jewish text was directly or indirectly a commentary to the Torah.

For a hundred generations it was more than a book. It was G-d's love letter to the Jewish people, the gift of His word, the pledge of their betrothal, the marriage contract between heaven and the Jewish people, the bond that G-d would never break or rescind. It was the story of the people and their written constitution as a nation under G-d. When they were exiled from their land it became the documentary evidence of past promise and future hope. In a brilliant phrase the poet Heinrich Heine called the Torah "the portable homeland of the Jew." In George Steiner's gloss, "The text is home; each commentary a return." (George Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," in The Salmagundi Reader, 99-121)

Dispersed, scattered, landless, powerless, so long as a Jew had the Torah he or she was at home-if not physically then spiritually. There were times when it was all they had. Hence the lacerating line in one of the liturgical poems in Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur: Ein lanu shiur rak haTorah hazot, "We have nothing left except this Torah."

It was their world. According to one Midrash it was the architecture of creation: "G-d looked in the Torah and created the universe." According to another tradition, the whole Torah was a single, mystical name of G-d. It was written, said the sages, in letters of black fire on white fire. Rabbi Jose ben Kisma, arrested by the Romans for teaching Torah in public, was sentenced to death, wrapped in a Torah scroll that was then set on fire. As he was dying his students asked him what he

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saw. He replied, "I see the parchment burning but the letters flying [back to heaven]" (Avodah Zarah 18a). The Romans might burn the scrolls but the Torah was indestructible.

So there is immense power in the idea that, as Moses reached the end of his life, and the Torah the end of its narrative, the final imperative should be a command to continue to write and study the Torah, teaching it to the people and "putting it in their mouths" so that it would not abandon them, nor they, it. G-d's word would live within them, giving them life.

The Talmud tells an intriguing story about King David, who asked G-d to tell him how long he would live. G-d told him, that is something no mortal knows. The most G-d would disclose to David was that he would die on Shabbat. The Talmud then says that every Shabbat, David's "mouth would not cease from learning" during the entire day.

"When the day came for David to die, the Angel of Death was dispatched, but finding David learning incessantly, was unable to take him-the Torah being a form of undying life. Eventually the angel was forced to devise a stratagem. He caused a rustling noise in a tree in the royal garden. David climbed up a ladder to see what was making the noise. A rung of the ladder broke. David fell, and for a moment ceased learning. In that moment he died." (Shabbat 30a-b)

What is this story about? At the simplest level it is the sages' way of re-envisioning King David less as a military hero and Israel's greatest king than as a penitent and Torah scholar (note that several of the Psalms, notably 1, 19 and 119, are poems in praise of Torah study). But at a deeper level it seems to be saying more. David here symbolizes the Jewish people. So long as the Jewish people never stop learning, it will not die. The national equivalent of the angel of death-the law that all nations, however great, eventually decline and fall-does not apply to a people who never cease to study, never forgetting who they are and why.

Hence the Torah ends with the last command- to keep writing and studying Torah. And this is epitomized in the beautiful custom, on Simchat Torah, to move immediately from reading the end of the Torah to reading the beginning. The last word in the Torah is Yisrael; the last letter is a lamed. The first word of the Torah is Bereishit; the first letter is beit. Lamed followed by beit spells lev, "heart." So long as the Jewish people

never stop learning, the Jewish heart will never stop beating. Never has a people loved a book more. Never has a book sustained a people longer or lifted it higher.
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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"For on this day, He shall provide atonement for you, to purify you; you shall be forgiven of all your sins; before G-d shall you stand pure" (Leviticus 16: 30).

One of the highlights of the Yom Kippur liturgy is the reading of the Book of Jonah, a small book which contains a world of philosophy. The major message of Jonah is likewise the major message of Yom Kippur, so that the proper understanding of the former will most certainly illuminate the latter.

G-d comes to Jonah, son of Amitai, sending him to call the people of Ninveh to repent. Jonah refuses to do so, and believes he can escape the G-d of the heavens and earth by sailing to the sea. Why did the prophet find a mission to Ninveh so objectionable? Ninveh was the capital city of Assyria which was the arch enemy of Israel. Indeed, in the 8th century B.C.E, Assyria defeated the Ten Tribes and banished them into exile. Jonah cannot understand why G-d is interested in Assyria's repentance. After all, as long as the Jews have more merits than the Assyrians, the chances of an Israeli victory in battle are far greater. Hence Jonah seeks to escape G-d by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish.

A raging storm develops at sea, and a drawing of lots demonstrates that Jonah is responsible for the storm. It is fascinating to note that water is both a major symbol of the Book of Jonah as well as a major symbol of the Tishrei period of festivals. Water is both a symbol of life as well as of destruction. The Bible opens "and the spirit of G-d hovered over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1: 2) and no life can grow without the presence of water. At the same time the Bible tells us right before its description of the life giving waters that "there was darkness on the face of the tehom," usually translated as the depth of the cavernous waters of the netherworld. It was after all, the waters of the flood which threatened to destroy the world.

The Mishna tells us that on the Festival of Sukkot, G-d judges our merit for the life sustaining rain. Rain is therefore a symbol of G-d's gracious bounty, His purification of His children on the Day of Forgiveness. As the prophet Ezekiel says in words which we repeat again and again during the Yom Kippur prayers, "And I shall sprinkle upon you the waters of purification and you shall become pure" (Ezekiel 36: 25).

Jonah, who is cast overboard into the raging waters, has challenged G-d, endeavored to escape the Divine mission, and is therefore worthy of death. G-d, however, in His infinite compassion provides a great

fish - a creature of the water - to follow Jonah and bring him back to life. In Jonah's own words "I called, in my distress, to G-d and He answered me. From the belly of the grave I cried out. You heard my voice. You cast me into the depth of the heart of the sea... your waves passed over me... yet You lifted my life from the pit, O Lord my G-d" (Jonah 2:3-7).

The waters almost destroyed Jonah and the waters in the form of a water-creature sent by G-d saved his life. G-d is teaching the crucial lesson that Assyria, who has been so evil and destructive, can and must make a complete turnaround if the world is to be redeemed. And G-d is also teaching that He, G-d, is willing to overlook the evil Assyria has committed if she will indeed repent. Jonah refuses to accept this. He is after all the son of Amitai, a name which is derived from the word "emet," or truth. Truth demands that evil never be overlooked; evil must be punished. This is how Jonah explains why he refused G-d's mission ".... This is why I hastened to flee to Tarshish; I knew that you are a gracious and merciful G-d slow to anger abundant in loving kindness and forgiving of evil." (Jonah 4: 2) This is not the G-d in whom I want to believe, the G-d who described Himself earlier to Moses as the G-d who is "abundant in loving kindness and truth" (Exodus 34:6). But Jonah has forgotten that his first name means dove, and that just as the dove was saved from the flood so was he, Jonah, undeservedly saved from the raging waters. G-d is teaching him that the G-d of compassion will bestow His life giving purity even upon those who have sinned.

On Yom Kippur, each of us descends into the "waters of death." We wear the white reminiscent of shrouds, we remove ourselves from all physical necessities and pleasures such as food, drink, and sex, and we wear the non-leather shoes of the mourner. For whom are we mourning? We are mourning for ourselves who have died because of our sins.

G-d in his compassion, however, returns us to life on Yom Kippur, reborn and purified. G-d sprinkles upon us His life giving waters "For on this day, He shall provide atonement for you, to purify you; you shall be forgiven of all your sins; before G-d shall you stand pure" (Leviticus 16: 30). All of us experience the death and the rebirth of Jonah. As the final Mishnah in Yoma says, "How fortunate are you O Israel! Before whom are you purified, and who purifies you? Our Father in Heaven." © 2012 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The parsha of Vayelech is the parsha that contains the smallest number of verses - only thirty - of any other parsha in the Torah. It also is the parsha that usually coincides with Shabat Shuva, the holy Shabat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The words of

the parsha are part of the last testament of Moshe uttered on the day of his passing from this earth.

As is his wont, Moshe minces no words regarding the fate of the Jewish people in its future story. Thus the shortest parsha of the Torah is also one of the most powerful of all of the parshiyot of the Torah. In effect Moshe warns his people Israel that the Lord will hold them accountable to the terms of the covenant of Sinai and that that covenant is irreversible and unbreakable.

It will take a long time and much twisting and turning by the Jewish people before they accept that reality of covenantal responsibility. But Moshe assures them that eventually the message will set in and that this will be the basis for the Jewish return to G-d and His Torah. This is the essence of the parsha's content and the brevity of the parsha only serves to enhance the power of its message.

There are certain self-evident truths that need no extra words, explanations or language. This parsha especially gains in power and relevance as Jewish history unfolds over thousands of years. Every deviation from the covenant of Sinai has eventually brought with it angst and pain if not even disaster in the Jewish world. Just look around at Jewish society and history and Moshe's words are clearly vindicated by circumstances and events.

Personal repentance and return is far easier to achieve than is national repentance and return. The Jewish people or at least a significant part of it has strayed very far away from the covenant of Sinai. The situation here in Israel is far better than it is in the Diaspora where intermarriage, ignorance, alienation and false gods have eroded Jewish faith, family, self-identity and values. How is it possible to hope for a national return to the covenant of Sinai under such circumstances?

Our short parsha seems to indicate that it will be a process and not a sudden epiphany. The prophet in the haftorah indicates that such a process will be incomplete without the recognition that the false gods and temporarily popular ideals all have led nowhere. He echoes Moshe's words in our parsha that return and repentance in a national sense can only occur if there is a realization how badly we have gone astray.

The great challenge, of the modern culture upon us, is how pervasive it is in every facet of our lives. The confusion that this engenders in the Jewish people prevents clear thinking, accurate judgment and honest assessments of true Jewish values versus current faddish correctness.

Our parsha is short but our way back is long and rigorous. In this good and blessed year that has just begun let us start - and continue that journey that leads back to Sinai and forwards to complete national redemption. © 2012 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on*

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshepeis

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. © 2010 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 ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

As Yom Kippur approaches, the concept of kaparah-atonement-is foremost on our minds. There are many ways to achieve different degrees of kaparah. When the Beis Hamikdash stood, korbanos were brought to atone for various aveiros. The elaborate service of korbanos offered in the Beis Hamikdash on Yom Kippur included several mechaprim. Korbanos offered on behalf of the kohein gadol, the regular kohanim, and all the Jewish People culminated with the sa'ir hamishtaleach-the goat sent out for atonement- completing the kaparah process. After we reenact the avodas Yom Hakipurim through our tefilas Mussaf on Yom Kippur, we lament in great detail our inability to achieve the level of kaparah once available to us.

Chazal teach us that there is a method of kaparah even greater than korbanos. The study of Torah and the performance of acts of kindness can achieve kaparah even in a situation that korbanos are not effective. Chazal comment concerning the house of Eli Hakohein, that although their sins cannot be atoned for through the mechanism of korbanos, talmud Torah combined with gemilus chassadim can bring them atonement. We who do not have the opportunity to offer korbanos can still avail ourselves of talmud Torah and gemilus chassadim as our mechaprim. While talmud Torah and gemilus chassadim are two fundamental aspects of avodas Hashem, why should they have the ability to be mechaper for aveiros?

In the tefilah of Hineni recited by the shaliach tzibbur before Mussaf on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we beseech Hashem, "u'peshaeinu techaseh b'ahava- cover all of our sins with love." This request expresses a basic concept concerning kaparah. Chazal observe that the ultimate mechaper, teshuva, elicits different levels of kaparah depending on the type of teshuva that is performed. Teshuva mei'ahava-a teshuva that results from an expression for one's love for Hashem and from a sincere desire to return to a close relationship based on that love-is the highest form of teshuva. Teshuva that merely emanates from yiras Hashem-fear of Hashem-is more limited in nature and cannot accomplish a complete kaparah. As such, as we strive to obtain kaparah, it behooves us to perfect our ahavas Hashem which is the prerequisite for teshuva mei'ahava. As we reach higher heights in our ahavas Hashem, we can beseech Hashem to express His love for us by covering our sins with that love.

How do we practically demonstrate ahavas Hashem and thereby merit the highest level of kaparah? It is precisely talmud Torah and gemilus chassadim that express and strengthen this love, and as such are our ultimate mechaprim. Regarding the obligation of "v'ahavta es Hashem", the Sifrei comments "eich attah ohev-how do we attain this love?" The next passuk answers this dilemma: "vehayu hadevarim ha'eileh"; the mitzvah of Talmud Torah is the key to ahavas Hashem. As the Rambam in Hilchos Teshuva develops the principle, "lefi ha'de'ah tihiye ha'ahava-according to one's knowledge of Hashem will be one's love for Hashem." Knowledge of Torah is our way of attaining knowledge of Hashem, enabling us to experience ahavas Hashem.

There is another way we express our ahavas Hashem. Acts of gemilus chassadim are the way we imitate Hashem and fulfill the mitzvah of "v'halachta b'derachav-you should walk in His ways." Modeling our behavior after Hashem's is a testament to the love and admiration we have for Him, since we try to imitate that which we love.

These two manifestations of ahavas Hashem-talmud Torah and gemilus chassadim-are our most sincere expressions of teshuva mei'ahava, and as such are our most effective methods of teshuva. May Hashem grant us the privilege to be chozer b'teshuva shleima and fulfill for us, "u'peshaeinu techaseh b'ahava." © 2012 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky and the TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg
Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne

The Baal Shem Tov is quoted as making a very important declaration. "I am very afraid and tremble more from the double language, 'haster

astir'-I will hide my face-than from the fact of the hiding itself." That is, when a person is aware that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is hiding, he can search for Him. But if he is unaware that G-d is hidden, he is not worried and he does not surrender, because he sees himself as a righteous man and he will not turn to repentance.

The Baal Shem Tov describes this situation in a parable. "This is a very shocking claim, how can it be that the Holy One, Blessed be He, hides His face from Yisrael? This can be compared to a king who set up imaginary partitions around his palace to prevent people from entering, while he hid inside behind the walls, and who later made the illusions of boundaries of flames and rivers-all through trickery and sleight of hand. A wise prince wondered how it could be that his father, who was so kind, would not want to see his own son. He concluded that everything was an illusion- that is, the king wanted to see how hard his son would strive to get to him, and that nothing was really blocking the way. And, as soon as the son seemed to put himself in danger by entering a river, it immediately disappeared. The same thing happened with all the obstructions, until the son arrived at the king's palace. But a foolish prince was afraid to cross the 'boundaries'- some people crossed the water but were afraid of the walls and the flames. And this applies very simply to real people."

The wise man knows that everything that interferes with true service of G-d is merely a test, to see if the person's yearning to see the face of the king is an honest emotion. The son who yearns to see his father's face puts himself into danger in order to reach the castle. But then he discovers that all the barriers were imaginary, and that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is there all the time-even during an era of hiding.

When Yaacov was sent down to Egypt, he was told, 'I will descend with you and I will surely rise up again' [Bereishit 46:4]. It is written, "We must understand that even in the descent 'Anochi'-I-continues to exist. When you begin to understand that G-d's hiding is for your benefit, then I will surely rise up and you will be privileged to reach an especially high spiritual degree." [Baal Shem Tov-Vayigash].

The author of the "Toldot" describes this situation with another parable:

"This can be compared to a king who sends one of his slaves to check on his subjects by commanding the slave to act as if he wants to revolt against the king. Some people react by saying: If you are the king, we will serve you. And they surrender to the slave. Others wage war against the slave. And still others say: How can it be that a lowly slave revolts against his king? It must be that he is following the orders of his master-and they tell the slave to make peace with the king."

All the lusts, the evil thoughts, and the acts of the evil inclination come only to awaken mankind. Some people surrender, others wage war and manage to overcome their inclinations, and still others make

peace-they take control of the forces and use them in their service of G-d. As is written in the "Shema"-*"with all your heart"* [Devarim 6:5]-making use of both of your inclinations, the good and the bad.

Whenever a person feels interference, it is a sign that at that point he is being tested, and that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is hiding from him.

The letters yud-heh are one form of the name of G-d. Aleph is the first letter of another form of the name of G-d, "Anochi." The aleph represents the Master of the Universe. The words "haster astir" contain all three letters, aleph-yud-heh. G-d is a "hidden deity," and "Anochi" appears in the double phrase, "haster astir." © 2012 Rabbi A. Bazak and Machon Zomet

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd you will seek out from there (from the foreign countries you were exiled to) Hashem your G-d, and you shall find Him, for you will search for Him with all of your hear and all of your soul" (D'varim 4:29, and included in the S'lichos liturgy). The first "you," which refers to those who want to find/return to G-d, is in the plural form, while the rest, which refer to those who find Him, are all in the singular form. The commentators suggest several approaches to explain this change from the plural "seekers" to the singular "finder."

Rabbeinu Bachye says that Moshe switched from plural to singular to avoid leaving the impression that only when the community (as a whole) wants to return to G-d will their repentance be accepted; even if it is only "you," the individual, seeking to return to G-d, while everybody else remains stuck in their mundane existence, "you will be able to find him." Despite the extreme advantage of a community, and specifically of a community repenting vs. an individual repenting (see Rosh Hashanah 17b, although Rabbeiu Bachye references B'rachos 8a, regarding the advantages of public prayer vs. private prayer), even if the community is still sinning, the individual that seeks G-d "with all of his heart and all of his soul" will be able to "find G-d," and no longer be considered to be part of a sinning community.

However, if the difference between the plural "you" and the singular "you" was (only) meant to highlight this aspect, I would have expected the switch from plural to singular to come before the "seeking." The fact that the switch occurs afterwards, with the "seeking" being done by the community, indicates that it is not just the individual trying to reconnect with G-d. Or Hachayim has a similar approach (see Alshich as well), telling us that it takes hard work to successfully reestablish a relationship with G-d, so only a select few are able to accomplish it. Because not everyone who seeks to return to G-d is successful, Moshe used the plural form regarding the "seeking" but the singular form

regarding the "finding." Torah T'mimah quotes the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 18a), which relates how two people can become sick, and both can pray to G-d (asking to be healed), yet only the one whose prayer was more "complete" is answered. This, he says, is why the verse switches from plural to singular, as not everyone who "seeks" actually "finds."

Meshech Chuchmah comes from the other direction (see Tzror HaMor as well), explaining how our nation is like a person, with each member of the nation being a different limb. This is only true, though, if we have a common focal point, the shared values that unite us. Therefore, when we were sinning, and were unconnected "parts," we were described in the plural (including the "seeking" part, as we, as individuals, find our way back to G-d), but after we have repented and returned to G-d, we are united once again, and can be described as one entity, in the singular form (see also Netziv).

When Rabbeinu Yonah discusses how to repent in "Y'sod HaT'shuvah," he talks about needing to press the "reset" button, starting with a clean slate. This fresh start (see also Gate 10 of Sefer Hayashar) is described as completely starting over, as if one is a newborn, with no merits or demerits. This has the advantage of leaving no "baggage" from past mistakes around to prevent changing, but has the severe disadvantage of not being able to build on the good things that had been previously accomplished. In "Sha'aray T'shuvah," Rabbeinu Yonah discusses not just the kind of repentance that is starting from scratch, but also the repentance that consists of correcting a specific weakness (or weaknesses) while leaving the strengths intact. When a computer isn't responding as it should, sometimes the program has to be shut down and restarted, sometimes the computer needs to be rebooted (not just the specific program that is crashing), and sometimes the hard drive needs to be wiped completely clean. The latter provides a cleaner start, but means having to reload every program again, one by one. Which way is better? It depends for whom. There is no reason to reformat the hard drive of a computer that will work just fine after restarting it, but an infected computer may not be of much use without starting from scratch. Some people can only start to move forward with an entirely new vehicle, while others just need a wheel alignment to set them straight. Some people have to change their name, move, and start over completely in order to return to G-d, while others can work on certain specific things in order to fix the parts that are broken.

No two people are exactly the same, so the things that G-d expects of them can't be exactly the same either. Besides having different "roles," we don't all make the same mistakes, and we therefore don't all have to make the same corrections. Sure, there are many areas of common ground, such as being obligated to keep the Torah, but the specifics of where

(and how) we can improve are not exactly the same. Each of us has to try to figure out which areas we can improve in, make sure it is attainable, develop a plan to make those improvements, and then put that plan into action. But our plans won't be exactly the same, and the areas they are meant to improve won't be the same either. In other words, even if we are all "seeking" to return to G-d, how we "find" Him, and what that "finding" relates to (which areas are improved) differs from person to person. Therefore, even though the "seeking" is said in plural form, the "finding" is in the singular.
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RABBI A. LEIB SCHEINBAUM

Peninim on the Torah

For Hashem's portion His people; Yaakov is the measure of His inheritance-(32:8)

Hashem's "cheilek," portion, is His people. Yaakov Avinu used the word "cheilek" in a similar sense in his response to his mother Rivkah, concerning why he did not want to pose as Eisav. "But my brother Eisav is a hairy man and I am an ish chalek, smooth-skinned man" (Bereishis 27:11). At first glance one would say that while these words "cheilek" and "chalek," portion and smooth-skinned, are spelled the same, their commonality is limited to their spelling. The Midrash, however, draws a parallel between Klal Yisrael as G-d's portion and Yaakov's smooth skin. How are we to understand this?

Horav Gedalya Schorr, zl, explains that, by nature, Klal Yisrael is upright and just, virtuous and pure. As the Maharal comments, Klal Yisrael's sin, their indiscretions are only b'mikreh, incidental, and not b'etzem, a part of their essence.

When a Jew transgresses, he does not sully his essential character. It is only an external, superficial failure which can easily be cleansed and removed via the medium of teshuvah, repentance. The Midrash explains that when one is hairy, the dirt sticks to him and becomes entangled in his hair. In contrast, one who is smooth-skinned can easily wash off the dirt. A Jew can repent and return to his previous standing because "Ki cheilek Hashem amo," the essence of a Jew is the fact that he is chalek, "smooth-skinned." His transgression does not permeate his essential character. Eisav, on the other hand, is an "ish seir," hairy man, an analogy that describes the manner in which sin envelops his essential character, making it difficult to remove the taint.

Horav Schorr explains that this is the concept underlying tevilah, immersion in a mikveh: the removal of spiritual contamination. Since a Jew is an "ish chalek," smooth-skinned man, the contamination is superficial, making it easy to wash off the taint via immersion.

Probably the most significant lesson to be derived from this idea is that the Jew is inherently good.

Thus, regardless of his errors, the extent of his distancing himself from Hashem only represents a surface wound that can quickly heal. © 2000 Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum & Shema Yisroel Torah Network

THE AISHDAS SOCIETY

Aspaqlaria

by Rabbi Micha Berger

[Editor's note: This piece was written in 2006]

Five years ago, in the months after 9/11, we were a different people. You stopped on the road to help a stranger stranded on the side, regardless of their ethnicity. We all proudly flew our flags in a show of unity. Even the dynamics and unity with our community of American observant Jews was markedly stronger.

But now? The flag got dirty and faded into a grey, sky blue and pink, and was taken down, not replaced. And if the fellow on the shoulder of the road is identifiably Jewish, and I have time, or if it's not a stretch of highway frequented by many other Orthodox Jews who might have pity on him...

What happened? Why couldn't we hold onto that feeling?

There is a pasuq in Devarim which reads "The 'Eyes' of G-d are on [the Land of Israel] from reishis hashanah ad acharis shanah-the beginning of the year until the end of a year." The Satmar Rav points out the asymmetry; first the use of "hashanah", "the year", but it closes with just "shanah", "a year".

The Yismach Moshe notes that unfortunately that is the way with most of us. Every year, when it begins, we are all excited and determined. "This is going to be THE year!" The year I finally have the patience my children deserve, the year I get to synagogue regularly, the year... But the year goes by, and by the end, it's just "a year", another span on the calendar.

In VaYoel Moshe, the Satmar Rav adds that this can be read in the words nusach Sfarad concludes Qedushah, "hein ga'alti eschem acharis kereishis -- here I will redeem you in the end [of our history] as in the beginning [i.e. in Egypt]". Hashem will redeem a people for whom "the end is like the beginning". When we can end the year with the same determination to be better as we had when we began it, we will have merited the redemption.

And so, I find-and I assume most people do-that the list of things I resolve to do teshuvah for this year closely resembles the changes I promised myself I would make last year. And so I set out to answer the question of how can we make permanent change. (Ironically, I set out to answer this question last year and the year before, and the year before that...)

About a month ago I went on a trip to Northern Israel-brought food and supplies to Tzefat's poor and to our soldiers at and heading to the front. We also stopped by Chaifa and the Rambam Hospital. There we met Yechiel ben Zoharah (who could still use tefillos for

a complete recovery). Yechiel left his bunker, unaware that they were actually situated north of Hezbollah trenches. He was shot from behind, with shrapnel destroying much of his liver, part of his right lung (which the initial bullet went through as well), and his right shoulder. He was waiting for the other wounds to heal sufficiently for him to be up to reconstructive surgery on the shoulder. And yes, he is a righty. What made him stick out in my mind was something he did when it wasn't war-time. There are people capable of a moment of bravery, being in the line of fire to save another. It is a different skill (not greater or lesser, just different) to be able to live "heroically" for long stretches of time.

Yechiel lived alone, working the land and building at a spot near the Kineret for a year. I unfortunately forgot the name of the town in the Golan, at nearly 50 families, that he built around his efforts. (And of course, he had to brag about his daughter, who since turned 1.) What we try to do most Rashei haShanah is closer to the moment of heroism. We think of teshuvah in terms of being at a new place by the end of Yom Kippur.

Rav AY Kook describes two ways of doing teshuvah (Orot haTeshuvah ch 2). The first is sudden, "coming from some kind of spiritual thunder that centers the soul. In one moment he recognizes the evil and disgustingness of sin, and turns into a new person. This sort of teshuvah comes from some influence of inner gift, by some great spiritual influence, that it's worthy to seek its roots in the deepest of mysteries.... The higher teshuvah comes from the thunder of universal good, the Divine Good which underlies all the worlds...."

The second sort of teshuvah is gradual. "He feels that he must progress and improve his ways and his lifestyle, his desires, his thought patterns. In his travels on this path he conquers, bit by bit, the ways of righteousness, repairs his middos, improves his actions, teaches himself how to become more and more proper until he reaches the pinnacle of brightness and repair."

The first luchos, "G-d's manufacture they were, and the writing was G-d's writing" (Shemos 32:16). They were a "thunder from heaven", spirituality as a gift from the A-lmighty. As something unearned, there was no guarantee that they could be kept.

The Benei Yisrael sought to maintain this lofty experience; they had a need for further inspiration that could not await Moshe's return. They built the calf, and it all unraveled. That which was quickly gained was just as quickly lost.

For the second luchos, Moshe is told to "quarry for yourself two stone tablets like the first" (ibid 34:1). Man must take the first step. This is the gradual, incremental path. It's not a thunderous gift from Hashem, it is a call to which Hashem responds. He "will write on the luchos the ideas that were on the first luchos" (v. 2). But man must invest the effort.

The kind of rapid change we aspire for is similar to that Rav Kook compares to the first luchos. It is rapid,

because it is gifted from G-d. But it is much harder to keep permanent.

The events of 9/11 changed the environment in which we live. Among all the tragedy was a gift, an environment that called upon us to grow as people. But the growth didn't come from within ourselves; as the environment slowly returned to something more like (although never again the same) it was before, so did we lose much of that personal growth.

The Kotzker Rebbe once asked his students: There are two people on a ladder, one on the fourth rung, and another on the 10th, which one is higher?

The book where I saw this thought doesn't record his students' answers. I assume some recognized it as a trick question, and answered that it was the one on the fourth, some answered the 10th figuring the rebbe was leading them somewhere, and others were silent. But the rebbe's answer was succinct, "It depends who is climbing the ladder, and who is going down."

Once I told the story, the idea is familiar. The idea of spirituality is not where you are, as that is largely a function of forces beyond your control (your upbringing, your genetics, etc...) Rather, it's the direction you're heading in, and how rapidly you're getting there. To apply a notion from Kierkegaard, it's not about being a good Jew, it's about the process of becoming one.

What does this say about teshuvah? We think of teshuvah as getting from point A to point B. But if holiness is measured by our engagement in the process, should this be our goal of where to be by Yom Kippur? I would suggest that teshuvah is not akin to motion, but to acceleration. The aim is that by the end of Yom Kippur, we are more engaged in change; our foot is on the accelerator, we gathered tools to implement change and have started using them.

We must realize that "the work is long", that the entire year will be one in which we will need to slowly, incrementally, work toward our goals. I hope to use this time through the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah to make a plan for growth for the year, to change more by how I'm changing than to expect to stop the entire momentum of my life on a dime.

Through such efforts, we can hopefully look back on this year as "the year" even as it ends. © 2006 Rabbi M. Berger and The AishDas Society

