

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD 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. 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 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

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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." © 2013 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"You [Israel] are the children of the Lord your G-d. Do not cut yourselves and do not place a bald spot between your eyes..." (Deuteronomy 14:1-2)

One of the great thrills of living in the State of Israel is the extraordinary mix of Jews from around the world. On any given day, I can find myself sitting in synagogue with Jews from Morocco, Ethiopia, Russia, Britain and the United States. It's not only a geographical mix; our country is blessed with Jews from every possible branch of Jewish philosophy, from the most secular through the Religious Zionists, Lithuanians and Hasidim.

But plurality can also create tensions. Every day, we witness the struggle as different groups vie for control of the soul of the Jewish State. Last year, Israelis witnessed the battles over mixed seating on buses; this year the country has been consumed by tensions over women's prayer services at the Western Wall and whether ultra-Orthodox Jews should be conscripted into the Israeli army.

All of these battles culminated in the recent discussions over selecting the Chief Rabbis of Israel - whether they would be ultra-Orthodox or religious Zionist or modern Orthodox. And at the end of the day, all these differences make for a fascinating montage of varied colors, textures, sounds and tastes - as long as each respects and never attempts to delegitimize the other.

The Sifrei interprets the verse quoted above from this week's parsha that "You are the children of the Lord your G-d. Do not cut yourselves," as follows: "Do not make cuts on your body, and do not make factions (different splits regarding halakhic attitudes) on your body politic." The Hebrew "titgodedu" from the root verb "gud" or "guz" may mean slices or splits on the skin, or - alternatively - from the noun gedud, which means a separate unit or a split-off faction. Hence, the Talmud (Yevamot 14a) prohibits two different religious courts with opposing halakhic rulings in the same locality.

Maimonides' formulation of this issue provides important clarity: "Within the rubric of this ruling (not to

make cuts) is that there not be established two different courts within one city when one court may rule in one way regarding a certain custom and another court may rule in another way regarding that custom" (Laws of Idolatry 12:14). Maimonides prohibits two different courts from ruling differently about local customs; he would not prohibit two different courts from ruling differently about a halakhic prohibition (this in accordance with Rabbi Yohanan, B.T. Yevamot ibid).

As Rav Kapah explains in his Commentary on Maimonides, custom is determined by local populations, and community discipline demands uniformity in matters of communal conduct. Precedent is the determining factor, with logic or conscience playing no role.

Halakha is very different; if one rabbi believes that a specific view in halakha is the correct interpretation, then he cannot be expected to concede his opinion. Here intellectual honesty and halakhic integrity are at stake; and since each opposing view is rooted in differing interpretations of the same fundamental Torah, that underlying unity does not insist upon uniformity, and permits room for differences of opinion even in the very same city. And even when communal custom and conduct are concerned, if the customs hark back to differing geographical origins - such as Sefardi and Ashkenazi - all decisors permit separate Sefardi and Ashkenazi courts of law in the same city, despite our portion's prohibition.

Consider a case in point: Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv was a Torah scholar of gargantuan proportions and a leader of the ultra-Orthodox world. But he was a "Man of the Book" - the books of Torah, of Talmud - he had little time for or interest in people. His wife greatly praises him for his commitment to the Book, explaining that he couldn't be interrupted from study even if the issue was a family crisis. His daughter was in total awe of her father's devotion to G-d's words, and understood that he had little time to spend with his children. At most, they could silently accompany him on his Shabbat afternoon sunset walk, when the darkness at home precluded him from studying at his desk. His major context was subservience to the law and maintenance of the purity of Israel; in consequence, his decisions regarding women in desperate need of a get were stringent, rarely, if ever, permitting the religious court to coerce a bill of divorcement from an unwilling husband.

Rav A.Y. HaKohen Kook, on the other hand, insisted that "the Book" must be an expression of the heart, the heart of the nation of Israel, the heart of the people of Israel (Eulogy, "On our Altars Lay the Corpses"). The Talmud therefore provides many leniencies in freeing women from impossible marital situations, clearly stating that, "for the sake of freeing an aguna, we must bend the law to even accept the testimony of a Gentile."

Halakhic conscience insists that we religious Zionists not be subservient to many of the halakhic dicta

of the ultra-Orthodox. Halakhic unity insists that we all unite behind the same Torah and Talmud. Halakhic conscience impels us to have different celebrations each with its unique interpretations; halakhic unity inspires us all, every day, to remain on the same page of the Talmud, realizing that, "these and these are the words of the living G-d" (Eruvin 13b) and that there are many legitimate - even if differing - paths to approach the Divine throne of the Almighty. © 2013 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Moshe seemingly interrupts his long oration to the Jewish people about their history and destiny with a surprising review of the year's calendar holidays. The calendar has always been central to Jewish life and survival. Under the dark regime of Stalin, Soviet Jewry was forbidden from owning or possessing a Jewish calendar.

The depths of loyalty of Soviet Jewry, to their inner faith, is seen in the fact that somehow millions of Soviet Jews still knew when the Jewish holidays - especially Simchat Torah - would occur. For the calendar is the rhythm of our lives and evokes with it memory, hope and a feeling of the timelessness of Jewish life and its traditions.

As such, the mere existence of the Jewish calendar posed a threat to the atheistic, cruel Communist regime that ruled then over a large part of humankind. The calendar in Jewish life and thought does not really only mark the passage of time gone by. Rather, it focuses on time that is yet to come, on the future, which can somehow always be brighter than was the past.

One of my younger grandchildren proudly told me that he had calculated how many years in the future a certain anomaly on the Jewish calendar, regarding erev Pesach, would occur. I bless him that he lives to see it but he is already certainly enthusiastic about the prospect and looks forward to its happening.

The calendar supplies us with a vision of the future and allows us the ability to feel that we are masters of our own fate and that we can, by our own efforts, be influential in determining our destiny.

The Jewish calendar is a progression of one holy day to the next holy day. We are always on the way to celebrate and commemorate our obligations to serve our Creator. Though there have been numerous sad days introduced into our calendar since the times of Moshe, the Jewish calendar still remains one of upbeat spirit and joy, family and hospitality, compassion and appreciation of life and its bounties.

The parsha of Re'eh always falls in the month of Elul, leading to the glorious month of Tishrei with its days of awe and compassion and the celebration of Torah and its commandments on Succot. The review of

the Jewish year, which occupies a great deal of the subject matter of this week's parsha, is therefore most fitting for it prepares us not only for the coming month but for the coming year generally.

Though the future is always inscrutable, we can nevertheless be comforted and feel secure by the consistency of our calendar, which has marked the journey of the Jewish people through time and centuries. The Jewish calendar reminds us daily of our uniqueness as a people and of the eternity of our Torah and our faith. It thus fits rather neatly into Moshe's overall message to the Jewish people as recorded for us here in the book of Dvarim. The passage of time itself is one of the life's gifts bestowed upon us by our Creator. © 2013 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 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 covenant mission.

With the establishment of the State of Israel we are all of us a bit closer to the covenant's ultimate fulfillment. The Torah's words concerning re'eh as covenant should be carefully considered.

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RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reflects Zion's illustrious future during the Messianic era. The haftorah begins with a call to Yerushalayim to sing over the return of her masses. The prophet Yeshaya invites her to expand her borders to allow for the overwhelming influx of Jewish people who are returning home. Yeshaya tells Zion not to be embarrassed because no trace of her previous shame will remain. He assures her that Hashem's kindness is here to stay and that His peace will be with her forever.

Suddenly, Yeshaya takes a sharp turn and proclaims, "Afflicted stormy city who is not consoled." These words indicate a strong unwillingness of Zion to be comforted. Although the ingathering of the exiles has occurred and the land of Israel has been rebuilt, Zion cannot be consoled. Her two thousand years of ruins demand to be accounted for. In the past, she had served as the focal point of the world, the apex of society. But for ages, her respect, dignity and elevated status were taken from her. Instead of splendor and glory, she constantly experienced shame, degradation and destruction. When reflecting upon her glorious past she cannot help but remember the shameful years that followed and cannot be consoled.

Hashem responds to Zion and says, "Behold I will lay your floors with precious stones and set your foundation with sapphires." (54:11) To begin, Hashem assures Zion that she will be restored to her previous glory. But Hashem expanded this kindness and pledged to render her more desirable than ever before. He promised that her splendor will be so magnificent that her floors and walls will actually be studded with jewels and precious stones. Her physical beauty will transcend every existing structure in the world and she will literally glisten from diamonds. Every moment spent in Zion will be an unforgettable experience which will irresistibly attract the masses to view her splendor.

This development addresses the physical dimensions of Yerushalayim but what about her spiritual heights? For two thousand years Zion has not been functioning as the Torah center of the world. How can she be comforted from this loss? In response to this, the prophet adds a major dimension and says, "And all of your children will be students of Hashem and much peace will be amongst them." (54:13) This means that Torah perspectives will be readily available to all the children of Zion who will now be students of Hashem. Chazal (see Yalkut Shimoni 479) explain this reference to mean that peace and harmony will exist amongst Torah leadership. As Chazal view things, present day confusion and diversity result from human limitations found within Torah study. Until the era of Mashiach one must rely upon the finite human mind for the transmittal of Torah knowledge from teacher to student. Being that the teacher's intellect is limited it follows naturally that the student's absorption of Torah knowledge will have even greater limitations. Yeshaya reveals that in the time of Mashiach matters will drastically improve. Because, Zion will be privileged to study Torah from its original source, Hashem. One readily understands that because there are no limitations to Hashem few limitations will exist amongst His students. The clarity resulting from this study will produce unparalleled levels of peace and harmony with everyone basically following the same Torah path of observance.

The prophet expands this vision and opens this renaissance to the nations of the world as well. He addresses them and says, "All who are thirsty go and drink water, acquire without pay wine and milk." (55:1) Chazal(Yalkut ad loc.) explain that water refers to Torah knowledge and wine and milk refer to spiritual sustenance. Even the nations of the world will be invited to Torah study and unique spiritual experiences. Radak explains that Hashem's wondrous revelations will yield an unprecedented thirst for knowledge. The nations will be so inspired by Hashem's miracles that they will flock to Zion to study His word. Zion will finally return to her previous spiritual greatness and serve as the Torah center of the world for the Jewish people. But in addition the Torah of Zion will be fully appreciated even by the nations of the world. Even they will see Torah as their

true source of life and will flock to Zion to absorb Hashem's every word.

Yeshaya now completes the picture and says, "Behold nations that never knew you will run to become your servants because the glory of Hashem will shine upon you." (55:5) The inhabitants of Zion will be held in such high esteem that nations from near and far will come to serve their every need. With this final detail, Zion will be totally healed. She has been promised her original splendor. In addition she will become the most desirable physical spot on earth. Her children will be privileged to study Torah directly from Hashem. She'll serve as the center of Torah for the entire world, nations of the world included. Finally, through her reflection of Hashem's glory, she'll attract untold nations who will display total subservience. Her lonely, forsaken past will be erased for eternity and she will forever enjoy her well earned status as the most desirable physical and spiritual site in the entire world. © 2013 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Yogli Roichman, Midreshet Alumah, Ariel

Western civilization has created an economic abundance the likes of which has never been seen before in all of history. In food stores, there is a wealth of choice, in all forms and colors. Malls are packed with people, and just about every home is loaded with the latest and most sophisticated technological advances. Even the poor people of today are not at all like those who lived in the past. But it is still true that situations of great poverty are generated in this society. Changes in work conditions lead to frequent loss of jobs. Many people are unemployed, and there is a growing gap between the very rich and the abject poor. It may be that the constant friction between the poor and the rich increases the feeling of a lack of means and of need for help.

Is poverty a necessary decree of heaven or could it be a punishment and a curse? In this week's Torah portion there are two conflicting verses. On one hand, we are promised that we will be blessed: "However, there will not be any paupers among you, for your G-d will bless you in the land which your G-d gives you as a heritage" [Devarim 15:4]. On the other hand, a situation is described where poor people are part of the daily experience. "For paupers will not cease to exist within the land" [15:11].

The Midrash explains the apparent paradox: "When Yisrael observe G-d's will, 'there will not be any paupers among you,' but when Yisrael does not observe G-d's will, 'paupers will not cease to exist.'" However, it seems to me that this answer is not sufficient. The Torah commands us in many places to give help to the weak and the needy. Are so many of

the mitzvot only meant for a time after the fact, when we are in a difficult situation?

Why is there poverty in the world? The Talmud tells us that this question was asked by the Roman governor Turnus Rufus: "The evil Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva: If G-d loves the poor people, why doesn't He provide for them? And Rabbi Akiva replied, I will give you an allegory. To what can this be compared? To a human king who became angry with his son and sent him to prison, and who then commanded that the son not be given anything to eat or drink. But one person went and fed him and gave him to drink. Would the king not send the man a reward?" [Bava Batra 10a].

The lesson is clear. Of course the king does not want his beloved son to die of hunger, and since he is angry he will not give him food by himself. But he will give a reward to anybody who does take care of the son. Note that in this allegory the poor person is the son of the king. However, the son/poor man does not feel his father's love directly. We can assume that he feels chastened by his father and kept at a distance. But the truth is that the king/father takes care of his son in an indirect way. The Holy Alshich summarizes the situation as follows: "He, the Blessed One, loves the paupers. Why then does He make them poor? It is because He wants to give merits to the rich people, and He gives the rich the portion of the poor people in addition to their own. Thus, in the end, the rich man is really giving charity from the poor man's own portion."

In addition, the Alshich does not view poverty as a punishment but rather as part of the Divine plan, where every person is provided with what he or she needs in order to be able to strive for perfection: "This can be compared to a physician who treats two different patients. He might prescribe for one to eat large portions and for the other one to be starved, even though he loves them both and is being paid for his work by both of them. But he understands that the way to cure one of them is to feed him while the way to cure the other one is to keep him hungry. In the same way, G-d knows that it is good for one person to be poor, so that he will be cured from his spiritual illness, and that another person will be cured by being wealthy."

The Torah commands us, "Do not close your hand to your brother, to your pauper" [Devarim 15:7]. Does this mean that we should give charity to every person who asks for it?

The Rambam emphasizes that one should give charity only "if the one giving the charity can afford it" [Hilchot Matnat Aniyim 7:1]. The answer is that the above verse in the Torah can be understood as a command to us about the proper way to give charity. It must be given in a pleasant way and with a show of mercy, in an attempt to make the recipient feel good. "If somebody gives charity to a poor person with a bad look on his face - even if he gives away a thousand gold pieces, he has lost his merits. Rather, it should be given pleasantly, with joy, and in a way that commiserates

with the poor person for his troubles... If a poor person asks for help and you do not have anything to give, you should comfort him with kind words. One is not allowed to scold a poor person or to raise his voice and yell at him, for his heart is broken and he is low down..." [Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 10:4-5].

I have seen two interesting explanations of the graphic phrase, "to close the hand..." in the above verse. One is from Rabbi Yeshua Laloum, a wise man from Algiers from the last generation: "If you harden your heart your hand will close and all the fingers will seem to be the same. And you will tell him to work like you do. But when you open your hand you can see that some fingers are longer and some are shorter. That is how the Holy One, Blessed be He, created human beings - some have more than others, some receive their needs from others."

Here is another explanation by Rabbi Avraham Seva, a scholar from Spain: "Remember that you were naked when you came out of your mother's womb, with your hands open, with the appearance of somebody asking for charity, and G-d was kind to you and gave you charity. Therefore do not close your hand, with the look of one who is leaving this world." © 2013 Rabbi A. Bazak and Machon Zomet. Translated by Moshe Goldberg

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

This week's Parasha ends with a short review of the biblical holidays. However, there are five biblical holidays, and only three are discussed here; Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are not mentioned at all. Additionally, Sh'mini Atzeres is not included with Succos (putting aside whether it is considered a holiday in its own right, which would mean that only three of six biblical holidays are re-taught here rather than three of five). Why did Moshe only include some holidays in his farewell lectures, not all of them?

Ramban (D'varim 16:1) points out that the nation already knew about the holidays, as they had been taught about them several times. This touches upon a larger issue; why Moshe repeated some laws in his farewell lectures, why he didn't repeat others, and why the details of those he did repeat are sometimes presented differently (see Ramban on 1:1). Here, Ramban posits that teaching about the holidays stemmed from the earlier instructions to bring Ma'aser Sheini (14:28) and first-born animals (15:19) to "the place that G-d chooses," with Moshe adding that there are three times a year when all adult males must make this pilgrimage. Since there are only three holidays with this requirement (see 16:16), only these three are mentioned. Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom (<http://tinyurl.com/kqd55ap>) suggests that these holidays were taught here because of the requirement to "rejoice with our brothers" (see 16:11 and 16:14), which stems from the recently mentioned theme of "you

are sons to Hashem your G-d" (14:1), making us all "brothers." (I'm not sure why the requirement to include those less fortunate wouldn't apply to Sh'mini Atzeres too, or why, since it likely is, it was left out here. It is also peculiar that we read these verses on Sh'mini Atzeres even though that holiday isn't even referenced.) I would like to widen the connection with the holidays to more than just the subject matter recently discussed in the text.

Parashas R'ay begins by telling us that there are "blessings" and "curses" for either keeping or not keeping G-d's commandments (11:26-32). This mini-section ends with a subtle change from fulfilling G-d's "commandments" (11:27-28) to following "His statutes and laws." Whereas "commandments" ("mitzvos") seem to refer to things that signify our allegiance to G-d (by doing what He commanded us), "statutes" ("chukim") seem to refer to edicts that we would likely not have thought of enacting on our own, whose objective value are not readily apparent, while "laws" ("mishpatim") refer to regulations that make obvious sense to us, which we would likely have instituted on our own in order to maintain a properly functioning society. As a result of our allegiance to G-d, we must fulfill not only those "commandments" that signify this allegiance, but His "statutes and laws" as well. What does Moshe say are the "statutes and laws that [we] must be careful to keep in the land" (12:1)? Destroying each and every site where the nations who lived in Canaan worshipped their deities (12:2). In contrast to pagan worship occurring in multiple places, we are to limit our worship of G-d to one central location, "the place where Hashem your G-d chooses" (12:5). There are many "statutes and laws"; why does Moshe single out having one religious center as the epitome of a "statute and law"?

At first glance, this should be categorized under "commandments relating to our allegiance to G-d," not "statutes and laws." However, limiting our worship of Him to one location is counterintuitive to maintaining a strong allegiance, as one must now travel to a specific location—one that may be far away—in order to bring an offering to Him, rather than strengthening that allegiance any time and anywhere one is moved to do so. Mandating centralized worship therefore qualifies as a "statute," a rule put in place that is ultimately more conducive to accomplishing what needs to be accomplished even if it seems to work against it. Allowing multiple places of worship opens the door for varying modes of worship, rather than maintaining the specific types of worship mandated by G-d, as well as making it much easier for the worship to be directed to deities other than the One True G-d. By the same token, true justice is not subjective, and the civil laws, which promote a healthy society, can not vary from location to location. Therefore, establishing a central civil authority, the Sanhedrin (Jewish Supreme Court), located next to the central place of worship (see Rashi on Sh'mos 21:1), as opposed to having independent

civil authorities spread throughout the land, also qualifies as a "mishpat." [Civil courts were spread throughout the land, but they didn't have the authority to institute a new law; they could only apply the already existing law. If there was any doubt about how to apply the law, the case was sent to the next (higher) court, until either the known law was relayed, or it was decided by the Sanhedrin (see Rambam, Hilchos Mamrim 1:4, see also his wording in 1:1, calling their decisions "chok u'mishpat").]

From this point on in Sefer D'varim, the focus is on "statutes" and "laws," thereby necessitating the establishment of a centralized authority, which includes limiting the offerings brought to G-d to "the place that he chooses" (12:5-14). Although not every "statute or law" has a direct connection to there being a centralized religious authority, many do (such as where to bring certain tithes, see 14:22-23), the need for one applies to all of them. It is within this context that Moshe repeated the need to visit the nation's religious center three times a year. Therefore, since the obligation to do so only applies to Pesach, Shavuot and Succos, only these three holidays are mentioned.

From a larger perspective, the purpose of the lectures Moshe gave at Arvos Moav before his death was to renew the covenant between G-d and the Children of Israel (see D'varim 29:11-14). This included the historical overview that included a restatement of the "Ten Commandments" (5:6-18), repeating the consequences of straying from the obligations of the covenant (28:15-69), and setting up the "blessings" and "curses" to be recited after the nation crosses the Jordan (27:1-26; notice how the "statutes and laws" are book-ended by the "blessings and curses," indicating that they are how we fulfill our end of the covenant). When the covenant was first established, visiting the religious center thrice yearly was prominently included (Sh'mos 23:14-17). When the covenant was re-established after the sin of the golden calf, these thrice-yearly visits were included once again (Sh'mos 34:18-23). There too, only the holidays of Pesach, Shavuot and Succos were mentioned. Although the other holidays had not yet been taught (so could not be included), only these three holidays were part of establishing the covenant (likely because they were the ones that included visiting G-d's chosen place of worship). Therefore, when Moshe re-established the covenant with the nation almost 40 years later, only these three holidays were mentioned. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (8:34-36), "Ashrei / Praiseworthy is the person who listens to me [i.e., the Torah], to hasten to my doors every day, to the doorposts of my entranceways. For one who finds me

finds life and elicits favor from Hashem. But he who sins against me despoils his soul; all who hate me love death." Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi z"l (Spain; died 1263) explains: "Ashrei" refers to the highest form of praise that can be given. For this reason, King David opened the book of Tehilim with Ashrei. Likewise, the chapter in Tehilim known as the "eight-faceted praise" [because it repeats the aleph-bet eight times] begins with Ashrei. The word "Ashrei" is in the plural form because it can never be applied to a person who has only one good trait, only to someone who is well-rounded with good character traits.

R' Yonah continues: King Shlomo writes, "Ashrei is the person who listens to me," because one's willingness to hear what the Torah has to say is the source of all life [i.e., it is the basis for proper mitzvah observance and character improvement]. "Me" can mean not only the Torah in general, but the book of Mishlei (Proverbs) in particular. On the simplest level, the lessons in Mishlei are the key to a happy, successful life in this world, while on a deeper level, they bring a person to Olam Ha'ba.

King Shlomo continues: "All who hate me love death." R' Yonah explains: The goal of Torah study is to inherit life in this world and the next. This is a choice that man has, as the opening verses of our parashah tell us, "See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing--that you listen to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today..." (Drushei U'perushei Rabbeinu Yonah Al Ha'Torah)

"If there should arise in your midst a prophet..." (13:2) The Gemara (Bava Batra 12a) teaches: "A wise man is greater than a prophet." R' Avraham son of the Rambam (1186-1237) explains: The prophet referred to by this statement is not one of the prophets of the 24 books of Tanach, for they were all wise men and women in addition to being prophets, and they were certainly greater than someone who is only wise, but not a prophet. Rather, this statement refers to the many people mentioned in Tanach who experienced prophecy briefly, although they were not necessarily wise (see Shmuel I 19:20-21). Why is a wise man superior to them? Because he does not need them, but they do need him; without the wise man's wisdom and Torah knowledge, these "part-time" prophets would have no inkling of what is expected of them in this world. Such a prophet is even required to stand in the presence of a wise man, for there is no level higher than that of a Torah scholar. Knowledge of Torah is the ultimate purpose of creation, as Hashem told the prophet (Yirmiyahu 33:25), "If not for My covenant [being kept] day and night, I would not have created heaven and earth." For the same reason, even a king is required to have a Sefer Torah with him at all times. (Igrot R' Avraham ben Ha'Rambam, No. 7)

"Aser t'aser / You shall surely tithe the entire crop of your planting, the produce of the field, year by year." (14:22)

The Gemara (Shabbat 119a) comments on the opening words of our verse: "Aser bishvil she'titasher" / "Give tithes [charity] so that you will become rich."

R' Yitzchak Shmelkes z"l (rabbi of Lvov, Galicia; died 1905) asks: How can this be reconciled with the mishnah in Pirkei Avot (ch.1), "Do not be like servants who serve their master in order to receive a reward"?

He answers: The verse is teaching that one should give charity in the hope that he will thereby be given more money so that he can give more charity. (Bet Yitzchak)

"You shall surely give him, and let your heart not feel bad when you give him, for in return for this matter, Hashem, your Elokim, will bless you in all your deeds and in your every undertaking." (15:10)

R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (the Reisher Rav; killed in the Holocaust) writes: This verse is teaching that the degree to which one's giving tzedakah is considered a complete mitzvah depends on his attitude when he gives. Do not act haughtily toward the beggar and do not make him feel like you are giving begrudgingly. Rather, as we learn in Pirkei Avot (ch.1), "Let your house be open wide and let the poor be members of your household."

R' Lewin writes further: We read in Vayikra (25:37), "Do not give him your money for neshech / interest, and do not give your food for marbit / increase." On the peshat level, this is a commandment not to charge interest. However, R' Lewin quotes R' Moshe Cheifetz z"l (Italy; 1664-1711) who writes that the word "neshech" can also be taken literally, meaning "a bite." Says R' Cheifetz: When you give tzedakah, do not accompany your gift with "biting" words. Similarly, R' Lewin writes, the word "marbit" is used in Shmuel I (2:33) to mean, "the greatest people in a household." Thus, the verse in Vayikra can be read, "Do not give him your money with biting words, and do not give your food making the recipient feel as if you are a far greater person than he." (Ha'drash Ve'ha'iyun)

The above-mentioned R' Cheifetz writes further: It is not uncommon that beggars knock on our doors with a sense of entitlement. After all, they say, you have a mitzvah to give me tzedakah! Rather than having the desired effect, however, this causes people to want to withhold charity. And, when an unusually generous person does invite a pauper into his house, the pauper soon acts like he is king of the manor. In the verses quoted above, the Torah exhorts us to pay no attention to any rudeness on the beggars' part. Rather, we are called upon to strengthen ourselves and give tzedakah with a good heart and a shining countenance, for that is Hashem's desire. (Melech Machshevet: Parashat Behar) © 2013 S. Katz and torah.org