

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

Rabbi Sacks zt"l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.

What do you say to your successor? What advice do you give them? Vayelech is the place to look for the answer, because it is here that Moses finally handed the reins over to Joshua, and he and God both give him a blessing for the future. But they gave different blessings.

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Listen to them and they sound almost the same. Moses says "Be strong and of good courage, for you will come [tavo] with this people into the land" (Deut. 31:7). God says, "Be strong and of good courage, for you will bring [tavi] the Israelites into the land" (Deut. 31:23). Tavo or tavi, "come with" or "bring." The words sound and seem similar. But the difference as understood by the Sages was total.

Here is how Rashi puts it: "Moses said to Joshua, 'Make sure that the elders of the generation are with you. Always act according to their opinion and advice.' However, the Holy One blessed be He said to Joshua, 'For you will bring the Israelites into the land I promised them' -- meaning, 'Bring them even against their will. It all depends on you. If necessary, take a stick and beat them over the head. There is only one leader for a generation, not two.'"

These are the two extremes of leadership: consensus or command. Moses advised Joshua to pursue a policy of consultation and conciliation. What

he was saying in effect was, "You don't need to follow the people. You are the leader, not they. But you do need to work with the elders. They too are leaders. They constitute, in effect, your team. They need to feel that they are part of the decision-making process. They will not expect you always to agree with them. Often they will not agree with one another. But they do need to feel consulted.

"If they sense that you are not interested in their opinions, if the impression they have of you is of a person determined to do things his way regardless of everyone else because you know better, they will attempt to sabotage you. They will do you harm. They may not succeed. You may survive. But you will be injured. You will limp. Your standing among the people will be diminished. They will say, how can we respect one who is not respected by the elders?"

"I speak from experience. The Korach rebellion was serious. It was not just Korach; it was also the Reubenites, and other leaders from the various tribes. And though the rebellion was cut short in the most dramatic way possible, we were all diminished and nothing was quite the same ever again. So: make sure that the elders of the generation are with you. If they are, you will succeed."

God, according to the Sages, took the opposite approach. "The time has come to leave the wilderness, cross the Jordan, conquer the land and build the kind of society that honours the human beings I made in My image instead of enslaving and exploiting them. Don't look for consensus. You will never find it. People's interests are different. Their perspectives are not the same. Politics is an arena of conflict. I did not want it to be that way, but having given humanity the gift of freedom, I cannot take it back and impose My will by force. So you must show the people the way.

"Lead from the front. Be clear. Be consistent. Be strong. The last person who gave the people what they wanted was Aaron and what they wanted was a Golden Calf. That was nearly the end of the Jewish people. Consensus, in politics or business or even in pursuit of truth, is not leadership but the abdication of leadership. I chose you to be Moses' successor because I believe in you. Therefore, believe in yourself. Tell the people what they must do, and tell them why.

"Be respectful of them. By all means, listen to them. But at the end of the day the responsibility is yours. Leaders lead. They do not follow. And believe

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in loving memory of my dear parents
Chayim Yitchok ben Yehudo Hakauhen
Paul Kahn
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me, though they may criticise you now they will eventually admire you. People want their leaders to know the way, go the way and show the way. They want them to be decisive. Always treat people with the utmost courtesy and respect. But if they do not behave toward you as you do toward them, if they oppose and try to frustrate what you are doing, there may be no choice but to take a stick and hit them on the head. There is only one leader in a generation. If everyone is empowered, there is no music, only noise; no achievement, only an endless committee meeting at which everyone speaks and no one listens."

Those were, then and now, the two great options. But notice something odd. The person urging consensus is Moses. But Moses never acted by consensus. This is the man who almost had to drag the people out of Egypt, through the sea, and across a howling desert, the man who did things of his own initiative without even asking God.

This is the man who broke the Tablets of Stone hewn and engraved by God Himself. When did Moses ever lead by consensus? To be sure he had seventy elders, princes of tribes, and a devolved structure of administration with heads of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, but though they helped him, they did not advise him nor did he seek their advice. What suddenly turned Moses into a peacenik, a lead-by-consensus man?

That is one problem. The other is the advice given by God Himself: lead from the front, even against their will. But that is not how God acted, as understood by the Sages. This is what they said on the words immediately prior to the creation of humanity, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26):

"Let Us make man': From here we learn the humility of the Holy One, blessed be He. Since man was created in the likeness of the angels, and they would envy him, He consulted them...

"Even though they [the angels] did not assist Him in His creation, and there is an opportunity for the heretics to rebel (to misconstrue the plural as a basis for their heresies), Scripture did not hesitate to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility, that a great person should consult with and receive permission from a smaller one." (Rashi to Genesis 1:27; Genesis Rabbah, 8)

The Sages, puzzled by the plural, "Let us make man," interpreted it to mean that God consulted with the angels. Despite the fact that the use of the word "us" was dangerous -- it could be read as compromising the pure monotheism of Judaism -- nonetheless the principle of consultation is so important that the Torah takes the risk of being open to misinterpretation. God consults, according to the Sages. "God does not act tyrannically toward His creatures." (Avoda Zara 3a)

To be sure, the Sages said that at Sinai God suspended the mountain above the Israelites and said,

"If you say 'No,' this will be your grave." (Shabbat 88a) But this is not the plain sense of the verse. To the contrary, before he gave the Torah to Israel he commanded Moses to explain to the people what was being proposed (Ex. 19:4-6). And it was only when the people -- "all the people together" (Ex. 19:8) "with one voice" (Ex. 24:3) -- that the covenant was made. That is the biblical basis for the idea, in the American Declaration of Independence, that governments gain their authority from "the consent of the governed." The very act of giving humans freedom means that God never forces us against our will. As Eisenhower once said, "Hitting people over the head is not leadership: it is assault." So why was God here, as it were, speaking out of character?

The answer, it seems to me, is this: Both God and Moses wanted Joshua to know that true leadership cannot be a one-sided affair, be it the pursuit of consensus or command-and-control. It must be a deft balance of both. They wanted Joshua to hear this in the most striking way, so each said what they were least expected to say.

Moses, whom everyone associated with strong, decisive leadership, in effect told Joshua, "Don't forget to strive for consensus. Your task is not what mine was. I had to take people out of slavery. You have to lead them into a land of freedom. Freedom means taking people seriously. The leadership of a free people involves listening, respecting and striving for consensus wherever possible."

God, who gave humans their freedom and never imposed Himself on people against their will, said, "Joshua, I am God; you are not. I have to respect people's freedom. I have to let them go the way they are determined to go, even if it is wrong and self-destructive. But you are a human among humans and it is your task to show them the way that leads to justice, compassion and the good society. If the people do not agree with you, you have to teach them, persuade them, but ultimately you have to lead them, because if everyone does what is right in their own eyes, that is not freedom but chaos."

In short, leadership is not simple. It is complex because it involves people and people are complex. You have to listen, and you have to lead. You have to strive for consensus but ultimately, if there is none, you must take the risk of deciding. Had they waited for consensus Lincoln, would never have ended slavery, Roosevelt and Churchill would never have led the free world to victory, and Ben Gurion would never have proclaimed the State of Israel.

It is not the job of leaders to give people what they want. It is the job of leaders to teach people what they ought to want. But at the same time they must involve people in the decision-making process. Key figures and constituencies must feel that they were consulted. Collaborative, consultative, listening

leadership is essential in a free society. Otherwise, there is autocracy tempered by assassination. (A phrase attributed to Voltaire but actually from German diplomat Georg Herbert zu Munster, 1820-1902.)

Leaders must be teachers but also learners. They must be visionaries and yet have time for the details. They must push people but never too far, too fast, or they will fail. They must speak to the better angels of our nature, teaching us to love not hate, forgive not seek revenge. They must always prefer the peaceful solution to the one that involves taking a stick and hitting people on the head, even though they are prepared to do so if there is no alternative. Leaders must be capable of more than one style of leadership. Otherwise, as Abraham Maslow said, "Those who only have a hammer treat every problem as if it were a nail." (The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance, pp. 15-16.)

Considering the effort, energy, stress and pain, why anyone should seek to be a leader would remain a mystery, were it not for this luminous truth: there is no better way to flood life with meaning than to have lifted others and helped them to a greatness they never knew they had; to have together with others righted some of the wrongs of this injured earth and its creatures; to have acted rather than waited for others to act, and to have brought others with you, for the greatest leader on earth or in heaven cannot lead alone.

These are what make leadership the greatest privilege by which any of us can be blessed. As Moses said to Joshua, "Happy are you to have merited leading the children of God." (Rashi to Num. 27:18) The crown of leadership is invisible, yet you know who is wearing it and who is not. It is there, in front of you, waiting for you to put it on. (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:1) Wear it with pride and may all you do be blessed. *Covenant and Conversation 5782 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2021 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Now, therefore write this song for you, and teach it to the People of Israel..." (Deuteronomy 31:19). Is Yom Kippur a happy day or a sad day? Many associate the Day of Atonement with solemnity and trepidation. Indeed, according to most translations, the Torah specifically states regarding this holiest of days, "you shall afflict your souls" (Lev. 16:29).

The great Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, however, suggests a radically different understanding of this day. "On Tisha B'Av, I can't eat because I'm so sad," he said. "On Yom Kippur I have no need to eat, because I'm so happy." But what of the command to afflict oneself? What is the basis for his happiness?

In truth, his interpretation reflects a deep insight about the essence of the day, based on the fact that the Hebrew letters that form the root, "affliction" ("ayin-nun-yud"), are also the letters that form the root for expressions of joyous song. For example, the Torah states (Deut. 26:5) regarding the declaration of the farmer, who, filled with feelings of happiness, brings the First Fruits (Bikkurim) to the Temple: ("V'anita v'amarta"), "you shall happily sing and declare..." with the proper musical cantillations.

Similarly, at the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the Torah (Ex. 15:21) reports, "And Miriam (happily) sang to them" ("V'ta'an la'hem Miriam")

This gives us a fresh perspective on the aforementioned verse in Leviticus, which as we noted above, is usually translated as "you shall afflict yourselves". However, re-reading the Hebrew original – (t'anu et nafshoteichem) – in light of the above, we can accurately understand it as "you shall make your souls sing". Indeed, the next verse explains why we should be happy: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to purify you; from all your sins shall you be purified before God."

We can now gain an appreciation of the verse in our portion that refers to the Torah as a song. In what way is the Torah a song? Because like a song, the Torah can bring us great happiness via the commandments, which allow us to ennoble and sanctify ourselves. In the same way that we enjoy a great high when we accomplish a difficult task and perform it well, so, too, does the song of the Torah allow us to rejoice in the potential of human nature and the ability of the human being to achieve a life of morality and holiness.

It is for this reason that the Day of Atonement is fundamentally a day of happiness. One might have thought that with all the fasting and the many hours spent in the synagogue, we should relate to the day in purely solemn terms. But Yom Kippur is not a fast of sadness. Rather, it is when we re-discover our great spiritual capacity to be like the angels who never need food or drink, soaring close to God, and transcending the physical. It is then that we understand the meaning of true rejoicing: spending twenty-five hours in fellowship with the Divine, without need of physical comforts. This experience opens the window to the spiritual rejoicing that gives us such great comfort and well-being.

Indeed, the custom in yeshivot is to ecstatically sing and dance with renewed vigor and dedication after the last Shofar blasts are sounded at the end of the Ne'ila prayer, at the conclusion of the fast. The excited students and teachers declare with their enthusiasm: Behold, we have transcended our physical selves. We have climbed upwards into the Divine embrace. We feel Your gracious compassion, and we are ready and hopefully worthy to attempt to perfect ourselves and the world. ©2021 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Our teacher Moshe is described in the Parsha as being near the end of his life in this world. Yet, the Torah also describes his last days on earth as being vigorous, healthy, while continuing to teach and guide the people of Israel, as he had done for the past 40 years. The Torah itself testifies that even on the last days of life in this world, he was able to climb mountains, and gather the Jewish people at his feet to continue the process of accepting the covenant which guarantees the eternity and future of Israel.

He is not to be judged as an ordinary human being. That is certainly true spiritually where he ranks as the greatest of prophets and the supreme lawgiver in all human experience. But it is also true that physically he did not suffer the usual fate of human beings who age and lose much of their original vitality and influence.

The ravages of time are pretty much inescapable for all of us ordinary human beings. The Torah never records for us that Moshe "missed a day" at work because of fatigue or illness. Rather, he ranks above ordinary mortals in his physical prowess that did not diminish even in the days before he died. At the end of his life, the Torah itself says that his vision never faltered, nor did his physical condition wither or deteriorate.

In all respects, we must view him as the miracle man of all ages. The Torah indeed records the physical ailments and deteriorating eyesight of our patriarchs Isaac and Jacob. But when it comes to Moshe, none of these physical problems appear to affect him.

Yet, Moshe is but a mortal human being. He does not escape from the eventual fate of all creatures who come into this world. There is long series of comments that appear in Midrash where even Moshe's soul that resides within his body, pleads with heaven that the removal of the body and soul relationship does not occur.

It apparently suffices that Moshe is active and vital in his final moment on earth. This fact is highlighted by the word that depicts him as going and walking even in his final days and testifies to this unnatural natural wonder associated with him in his life. In spirit and knowledge, Moshe remains with us even today, even after the events described in this week's reading of the Torah. Perhaps that is also included in the idea that no one knows the actual place where Moshe is buried. It is part of his eternal legacy of life and perpetual accomplishment, that there are no markers or monuments to depict where his remains lie. We can, therefore, truly say that Moshe still walks amongst the Jewish people. ©2021 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs,

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Haziv Lach

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

No, this title is not the beginning of a liturgical poem recited on Shabbat Shuvah (the Shabbat before Yom Kippur). In fact, *Haziv Lach* is an acronym that tells us where to start each *aliyah* of Parshat Ha'azinu.

The *Kohen aliyah* starts from the letter *Heh* of the word "*ha'azinu*" and is 6 verses. The *Levi aliyah* starts from the *Zayin* of "*zechor*" and is six verses. The third *aliyah* starts with the *Yud* of "*yarkivehu*" and is five verses. The next *aliyah* starts with the *Vav* of "*va-yar*" and is ten verses. The fifth *aliyah* starts with the letter *Lamed* of the word "*lu*" and is 11 verses. The sixth *aliyah* starts with the letter *Kaf* of "*ki esa*" and is four verses, which takes us to the end of the poem. The seventh and final *aliyah* is nine verses and ends the *parsha*.

This division is codified in *Shulchan Aruch* 428:5. (There is an alternate division of Ha'azinu, which still follows the acronym of *Haziv Lach*.) Thus, we cannot readily add *aliyot* or divide the *parsha* differently. The most we can do is split the final *aliyah*.

The Rambam states that the reason to divide the *parsha* according to *Haziv Lach* is to rebuke the people so that they will repent (*Hilchot Tefillah* 13:5). It's not clear what he means, since all of Ha'azinu is about rebuke. Some explain that what the Rambam has in mind is the rule that we follow the rest of the year, namely to avoid beginning or ending an *aliyah* with words of rebuke. The custom of *Haziv Lach* does exactly what we usually avoid! The Rambam is justifying the custom by saying that it may bring about repentance on Shabbat Shuvah, which is focused on repenting. Alternatively, perhaps it is thinking about the acronym of *Haziv Lach* that can help bring about repentance. For the phrase itself means "Glory (*ziv*) is yours (*lach*)," a reminder that we have great potential to repent.

If this second reason is correct, perhaps it is necessary to follow the division only on Shabbat Shuvah itself (when we read the entire *parsha* and the entire acronym is spelled out), but not at the shorter Torah readings beforehand (on Monday, Thursday, and the previous Shabbat Mincha). This is a subject of disagreement among the *poskim*. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

"And Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel" (Deuteronomy 31:1). On the surface,

these words refer to Moses's impending speech. While this literal interpretation is accurate, the line may also refer to what Moses has just said, urging the Israelites to "choose life." As the Torah states, "See, I have set before you...life...and death...choose life" (30:15, 19).

This mandate is so fundamental that it frames, informs, and permeates all of Torah, including the thoughts Moses is about to share.

Choosing life is no simple matter, as many faith communities place emphasis on death. Death is the release from the imprisonment of the worldly body; it is the gateway to ultimate life. While Judaism posits belief in the afterlife, this world, the world of the living, is paramount.

The focus on this world rather than the next world marks the distinction between what Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in *Halakhic Man* calls the universal religious person and the Jewish religious person.

For the universal religious person (*ish hadaat*), the pathway to spiritual bliss is to move from this world to the next, to an otherworldly existence. But for the Jewish religious person (*ish halachah*), the movement is in the reverse, from the metaphysical world from whence we come to this world – to a "this-worldly" existence.

Thus, the covenantal imperative of partnering with God to improve the world refers to this world, the world of the living, not to the next, the world of the dead. Here, we are mandated to use all our abilities and all our strength to improve life.

As Rabbi Soloveitchik writes: The Halakhah is not at all concerned with a transcendent world. The world to come is a tranquil, quiet world that is wholly good, wholly everlasting, and wholly eternal, wherein a man will receive the reward for the commandments which he performed in this world. However, the receiving of a reward is not a religious act; therefore, halakhic man prefers the real world to a transcendent existence because here, in this world, man is given the opportunity to create, act, accomplish, while there, in the world to come, he is powerless to change anything at all (*Halakhic Man*, 32).

It follows that Judaism – unlike democracies that focus on individual rights – focuses on responsibilities. This emphasis on responsibility is reflected in the 613 commandments. Indeed, we have the responsibility to give, give, and give more in whatever way we can through medicine, social work, environmental advocacy, earning money to share with the vulnerable, and so on. The goal, in a phrase, is to qualitatively improve the welfare of humankind – thus choosing life.

More literally, the mandate to "choose life" refers to bringing life into the world – having children, adopting children, fostering children, and doing all we can to save life. Indeed, emphasis on life overrides any mitzvah; even Shabbat must be violated to save life.

Doing so is not a violation but a sanctification of Shabbat.

It is told that on Shabbat, Rabbi Chaim of Brisk saw a woman in labor. He quickly hailed a carriage, helped her in, and accompanied her to a hospital. He was questioned. It's one matter to help the woman into the carriage, but why go yourself? Are you not making light of Shabbat? He offered a classic response: it's not that I am mekil (lenient) on Shabbat, but I am machmir (stringent) on saving life.

The message of centrality of life resonates especially powerfully in the post-Holocaust era. Having experienced the Shoah, survivors could have declared that they want no part of this world. The greatest mitzvah performed by survivors was continuing to bring children into this world. In doing so, the survivors lived and breathed the message of the Song of Songs: "Place me as a seal upon your heart...for love is as strong as death" (Song of Songs 8:6).

U'vacharta ba'chayim! Choose life! ©2021 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd [Moshe] said to them, "I am 120 years old today..." (Devarim 31:2) On the last day of his life, Moshe spoke to the Jews, telling them that he was 120 years old, and he would not be leading them further, but Yehoshua would. The word, "Hayom," today, indicated that it was his birthday. This teaches that his years were completed and he died the same date he was born.

One lesson we can take from this is that "Hayom," today, we are a cumulative result of all our previous days and years. The goal is to learn and grow each day so that our lives are complete. If, however, one has not done so, he can regret the time lost, thereby utilizing it as a catalyst for growth now, and turn it around so his days are complete.

The Ramban here comments that Moshe spoke as he did to comfort the Jews. He said, "I'm old. You don't need me anymore." Further, "Hashem told me that I can't cross the Jordan, but He will bring you across into Eretz Yisrael." It was not due to weakness that Moshe could go no further, but due to Hashem's command. Yet, on his last day on earth, Moshe was concerned not with his own legacy, but with the feelings and fears of the Jews he would be leaving behind. This is the mark of a great person.

Even in his last moments on earth, Rav Yisroel Salanter spent his time thinking about the feelings of others. In his final illness, as he lay in bed in Koenigsberg, he had a man attending his needs. On the last day of his life, Rav Yisroel turned to this simple

man and started talking to him about the fear people have to be alone with a dead body. Rav Yisroel commented that it is a really foolish fear since a dead person cannot do anything.

A few hours later Rav Yisroel was niftar and, lo and behold, there wasn't anyone else around at the time. The attendant was alone. It became clear to the man that the strange conversation he had with the Tzaddik a few hours earlier was meant to dispel the fears that might engulf him later that day.

Surely Rav Yisroel, who knew his time was near, was deep in thought about life and death, teshuvah and Torah. Yet, he had the presence of mind in his weakened condition to concern himself with the feelings of another. ©2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Hashem Will Hide

Near the end of Parashat Vayeilech, Hashem called Moshe and Yehoshua into the Tent of Meeting: "Hashem spoke to Moshe, 'Behold, your days are drawing near to die, call Yehoshua and both of you stand in the Tent of Meeting, and I shall command him.' Hashem appeared in the Tent in a pillar of cloud, and the pillar of cloud stood by the entrance of the Tent. Hashem said to Moshe, 'Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this People will rise up and stray after the gods of that which is foreign to the land, in whose midst it is coming, and it will forsake Me and it will annul My covenant that I have sealed with it. My anger will flare against it on that day and I will forsake them; and I will conceal My face from them; and they will become prey, and many evils and distresses will encounter it. It will say on that day, 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have encountered me?' But I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that it did, for it had turned to the gods of others.'"

Hashem uses the term "hein, behold" when telling Moshe that he will soon die. The Ohr HaChaim uses this to praise Moshe. Moshe said to the B'nei Yisrael, "I am one hundred and twenty years today." Our Rabbis take this to mean that he said my days have been filled. Hashem then said to Moshe, "Behold, by your own proclamation, your days are drawing near to die." Moshe is rewarded for accepting that his days have been completed and that he would now die. Others disagree with the Ohr HaChaim and say that "hein" is not praise of Moshe.

A Midrash is told by the Siftei Hachamim about this term. Moshe says to Hashem, "With this word (hein) I praised you when I said 'Behold, the Heavens belong to Hashem, your Elokim.' Would you then send me to my death with this same word?" Hashem answered him by saying, "With this same word you spoke badly of the B'nei Yisrael when you said,

'Behold, they will not believe me (when I tell them that You have sent me to free them from Egypt).'" It appears from this interchange that the reason Moshe will not be permitted to go into the land is that he questioned the Faith of the B'nei Yisrael. Yet, any student of the Torah will tell you that Moshe was only prevented from entering the Land of Israel because of the incident of Miriam's Well, where he called the people "rebels" and struck the rock instead of speaking to it.

The Kli Yakar and the Da'at Z'keinim explain this contradiction. Even though Moshe's assessment of the people was accurate, he is punished for not doing more to improve the level of Faith that was in question. At Miriam's Well, both Moshe and Aharon are criticized with the words, "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the B'nei Yisrael, therefore you shall not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them." Had Moshe and Aharon demonstrated their Faith, the rock would have brought forth water on its own. The people then would have said, "a rock that does not hear and does not feel must follow the Will of Hashem, surely we must do the same." Moshe and Aharon should have used this opportunity to increase the level of the people's Faith. Moshe's assessment was correct, but he mishandled the opportunity to correct this problem.

Hashem's message to Moshe was a difficult one to hear, but one that Moshe had already seen and spoken of to the people. Hashem contrasted what the Kli Yakar refers to as Moshe's death in quiet and in peace with no suffering, with the future rebellion of the People against both the memory of Moshe and the Law of Hashem. By their eagerness to accept the strange gods of the Canaanites, they also rebelled against Moshe. The people would quickly turn to the "Elokei neichar ha'aretz, the gods of that which is foreign to the land." There is a wide range of opinion about the exact meaning of these words. Rashi describes these words as referring to the people of the land. The people are foreign because it was already decreed that they were not to be allowed to remain in this land because of their strange gods. The Ramban explains that the reference is to the gods which were foreign (inappropriate) to the land. This land was to be the Kingdom of Hashem on earth, and no other gods could claim that they rule in this land.

Hashem described his anger with the B'nei Yisrael and told Moshe that He would abandon the people after they had abandoned Him. Hashem uses the term "le'echol", but the meaning of this word is ambivalent in the pasuk. Rashi translates this as "prey." The ibn Ezra says that you will become prey to your enemies. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that one who has abandoned Hashem has nothing which guides him and gives him purpose. His life consists of "eating and drinking." Here the word is simply "to eat",

for a person with no direction, "eats" in order to live. He consumes his time with meaningless pursuits. His life is empty. It is as if he consumes himself as well.

Hashem uses the phrase "v'histarti panai meihem, I will conceal My face from them." There are many different opinions as to what the term, *hester panim*, means. *Mizrachi* and *Siftei Chachamim* describe this concealment "like one who turns away from something and does not care about it." *Rashi* describes this concealment "as if I do not see their distress." They will cry out to Hashem from their suffering but He will not answer them. The *Ohr HaChaim* explains that one may misunderstand and think that Hashem will watch and listen to the suffering of the people and not answer them. Instead, he understands that Hashem turns away from the people so that He will not see or hear their suffering, or He would not be able to hold back His Mercy from them, much as his warning to Rachel when her grave cries out for the Jews going into exile.

What is unusual is that it appears that even after the people will realize that Hashem is not in their midst, that He will continue to conceal Himself. Several want to claim that this realization was a form of "vidui, confession", but the *Ramban* insists that this was not a real "confession" as there is no indication that their behavior changed in any way. To him it was more a sign of regret for their behavior but did not rise to the level of *Teshuvah*. Still, even if one accepts that this was a true confession and a change in behavior, Hashem would still have decided to conceal His presence. But the *Ramban* makes a distinction between the first concealment and the second (after the "confession"). During the first, Hashem hid His Mercy from the people even though they cried out to Him. In the second concealment, Hashem will not hide His Mercy but only His presence. He will guard and protect the nation, but He will do this from behind the veil. True redemption will come only after the nation does *Teshuvah*.

Our task must be to make ourselves aware of Hashem's presence and His Mercy. The more that we study His Torah, the more we know that He is here among us. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

Our Parashah opens: "Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel." Why is Moshe referred to as "going"? *R' Mordechai Twersky z"l* (1798-1837; the *Maggid* of Chernobyl) explains: We read (*Bemidbar* 14:17), "And now, may the strength of my Lord be magnified, as You have spoken, saying." This alludes to the teaching of *Kabbalists* that when a person speaks, i.e., prays, he magnifies the Name of G-d and has the ability to elevate the souls of many Jews.

How does a person know if he is praying properly? The verse concludes, "You have spoken, saying" -- if, after a person prays, he wants to "say," i.e., pray more, then he knows that he has prayed well. But, if he is glad to be finished, he has not prayed properly.

We also read (*Kohelet* 4:17), "Guard your legs when you go to the house of Elokim." Proper prayer stands on two legs, says *R' Twersky*. One leg is man's belief in the holiness of the prayers, and the other is man's trust that Hashem accepts the prayers of even the least articulate person. However, a person must always be truthful, as *Chazal* say that "falsehood has no legs." [As written in the Torah, the letters of the word "Sheker" / "falsehood" all come to a point on the bottom. They "have no legs" and cannot stand.]

Moshe's prayers undoubtedly stood on strong "legs"; therefore, he was able to elevate the souls of the Jewish people. It was on those "legs" that our verse says he "went." (*Likkutei Torah*)



"He said to them, 'I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in...'" (31:2) *Rashi z"l* writes (in his second explanation of the verse): "'I can no longer take the lead in the matter of the Law.' This teaches us that the well-springs of wisdom were stopped up for him."

R' Nosson Sternhartz z"l (1780-1845; foremost student of *R' Nachman* of *Breslov*) explains: Moshe was saying that he was unable to advance any further in his spiritual growth. And, since a *Tzaddik* lives only to grow -- he cannot stand still -- Moshe necessarily had to pass away. (*Likkutei Halachot: Hilchot Tefilin* 5:36)



"Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Yisrael, 'Be strong and courageous, for you shall come with this people to the Land that Hashem swore to give them, and you shall cause them to inherit it.'" (31:7) *R' Shlomo Kluger z"l* (1785-1869; *rabbi* of *Brody, Galicia*) writes: At first glance, the words "before the eyes of all Yisrael" seem to be superfluous. The important thing is that Moshe summoned Yehoshua and told him: "Be strong and courageous."

It would seem, therefore, suggests *R' Kluger*, that these words are part of what Moshe said. He summoned Yehoshua and told him, "Before the eyes of all Yisrael, be strong and courageous..." He meant: A person is obligated to be very humble. However, a leader may not act too humbly in the presence of his people; if he does, they will not fear him, and his instructions will not be followed. Rather, a leader must display some degree of haughtiness and power to his people, while in his heart he remains humble and aware of his own low worth. (*Imrei Shefer*)

"For I know your rebelliousness and your stiff neck; behold! while I am still alive with you today, you have been rebels against Hashem [literally, with Hashem] -- and surely after my death." (31:27) The Gemara (Sanhedrin 37a) relates that the sage Rabbi Zera had neighbors who were gang members who terrorized the neighborhood. Rabbi Zera befriended them and attempted to bring them to repentance. After Rabbi Zera died, these thugs said, "Until now, Rabbi Zera prayed for us. Who will pray for us now?" They reflected on this and repented. [Until here from the Gemara]

Commentaries ask: Why was Moshe Rabbeinu so confident that Bnei Yisrael would "surely" rebel after his death? Maybe Bnei Yisrael would reason as Rabbi Zera's neighbors later did and would repent after Moshe died?

R' Peretz Steinberg shlita (Queen, N.Y.) suggests: Literally, our verse does not state that Bnei Yisrael sinned "against Hashem"; rather, it states that they rebelled "with Hashem." When Bnei Yisrael rebelled in the desert, they told themselves that their actions were all for the sake of Heaven, that they were "with Hashem." When one fools himself in that way, he will never repent. In contrast, the gangsters in Rabbi Zera's neighborhood knew that they were gangsters. They faced reality, and therefore they repented. (Pri Etz Chaim) © 2021 S. Katz & torah.org

ADINA CIMENT

Evil Decrees

One of the most famous prayers in the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur davening is the prayer of "Unesaneh Tokef." The prayer describes exactly what God writes on Rosh Hashana, and what He seals on Yom Kippur. The words provide a menu of ways to die – from stoning to drowning, from plague to hunger – and a description of other negative events that may befall you. Your fate for the year is pretty much written in the books during these high holy days.

The final line of the prayer, though, reminds us that nothing is set in stone: Repentance, Prayer, and Charity can avert the evil decree. It's a simple three-step-process to making sure we are written in the Book of Life, and that whatever decree was meant for us can be averted through our good deeds.

At least, I used to think that was what the prayer was about.

Maybe it was a bit of confirmation bias and the years of Yeshiva Day School that always taught me what the final line said. But this year, I actually read it carefully and noticed that the last line of the prayer does not say anything of the sort. Translated exactly, the final line reads: Repentance, Prayer, and Charity can avert the evil of the decree. We're not averting the

decree itself, just the evilness of it.

It's a subtle difference that changes the entire meaning. Looking back into the text at the list of ways to die, the new reading seems to imply that there is no way to escape the decrees of death and destruction. But it isn't as fatalistic as it sounds. The text doesn't say "You might drown. You might die by plague." It says that God decides "who" that will happen to, me and you being two of those possibilities. The poem is simply stating an obvious idea. Death, pain, suffering – these are things that we are all going to experience this year. We can't escape it. If it is not us, it will be someone we know. Something we will witness.

The last line then, the one about repentance, prayer and charity, is not a line giving us a recipe to make it all go away. Bad things will always exist in this world. Instead, it's giving us tools for how to cope with the evil that we may experience. It's telling us that to get rid of the evil of the decree, we need to do three things: look inward to ourselves, look up to God, and give back to our community. By looking inward, I can examine what this experience has done to me, what I can get out of it. How I can change from it. By looking up to God, I have someone to rail at, to duel with, to question. And by giving to my community, I can turn my experience into a positive. I can create a legacy. I can turn tragedy into positive action.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are days that focus on those relationships. It's a communal meditation on ourselves, God, and our friends. What the poet is telling us in this universal prayer is that we are not going to escape trauma and pain. We can't stop that from happening. But those experiences do not have to destroy us, our relationships, and our connections.

I have seen that happen to people I love who have experienced tragedy and pain. I have also been on the other side, the receiver of evil decrees, and I know the struggle to make sense of hardships when there is no answer for suffering.

It isn't easy.

The prayer for the new year is not a message of false hope, of a year without pain, but rather a guide for that weariness, a reminder of the tired expression that while pain is inevitable, suffering is a choice. These inescapable painful decrees can lose their destructive evil nature, and instead become catalysts for change and growth, if we heed the words of the poet: look inward, reach upward, branch outward. ©2020 A. Ciment. As president of The Raven Writing Company, Adina Ciment has been helping students improve their writing since 1994.

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