

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Commenting on a key verse from today's Parsha, a Midrash tells a pointed story: "Once Rabbi Yannai was walking along the way when he met a man who was elegantly dressed. He said to him, 'Will the master be my guest?' He replied, 'As you please.'

"Rabbi Yannai then took him home and questioned him on Bible, but he knew nothing; on Talmud, but he knew nothing; on Aggadah, but he knew nothing. Finally, he asked him to say Grace After Meals. The man, however, replied, 'Let Yannai say grace in his house.'

"Rabbi Yannai then said to him, 'Can you repeat what I tell you?'

"The man answered, 'Yes.'

"Rabbi Yannai then said: 'Say, 'A dog has eaten Yannai's bread.'"

"The guest then rose up and seized Rabbi Yannai demanding, 'Where is my inheritance that you have and are keeping from me?'

"What inheritance of yours do I have?'

"He replied, 'The children recite, 'Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob' (Deuteronomy 33:5). It is not written, 'congregation of Yannai,' but 'congregation of Jacob.'"' (Vayikra Rabbah 9)

It's a powerful story. Rabbi Yannai sees an elegantly dressed stranger and assumes that he must be well-educated. He takes him home and discovers the man has had no Jewish education whatsoever. He knows nothing of the rabbinic literature. He can't even say Grace After Meals.

Rabbi Yannai, a Torah scholar, looks down at the guest with contempt. But the stranger, with great dignity, says to him in effect, "The Torah is my inheritance as well as yours. Since you have much, and I have none, share a little of what you have with me. Instead of dismissing me, teach me."

Few ideas in the history of Judaism have greater power than this: the idea that Torah knowledge belongs to everyone; that everyone should have the chance to learn; that education should be universal; that everyone should be, if possible, literate in the laws, the history, and the faith of Judaism; that education is the highest form of dignity, and it should be accessible to all.

This idea goes so far back and so deep in

Judaism that we can easily forget how radical it is. Knowledge -- in the famous phrase of Sir Francis Bacon -- is power. Those who have it are usually reluctant to share it with others. Most societies have had literate elites who controlled the administration of government. To this day, many professions use a technical vocabulary intelligible only to insiders, so that their knowledge is impenetrable to outsiders.

Judaism was different, profoundly so. I have speculated that this is connected with the fact that the birth of Judaism happened at roughly the same time as the birth of the alphabet -- proto-Semitic, appearing in the age of the patriarchs, and whose earliest traces have been discovered in the Sinai desert in areas where slaves worked.

Mesopotamia, from which Abraham came, and Egypt in the days of Moses, had the world's two earliest forms of writing, cuneiform and hieroglyphics respectively. But these systems -- pictograms, ideograms and syllabaries in which symbols stood for whole words or syllables -- involved too many signs to be taught to everyone. The alphabet, with its mere 22 symbols, for the first time opened up the possibility of a society of universal literacy.

Judaism bears the mark of this throughout. Abraham was chosen to be a teacher, "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord" (Gen. 18:19).

Moses repeatedly speaks about education: "Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." (Deut. 11:19)

The verb l-m-d, "to teach," occurs no less than 17 times in the book of Deuteronomy, making it a motif of the book as a whole.

Above all is the personal example of Moses himself. Devarim, the book of Deuteronomy as a whole, is a massive adult education experience, the Master Prophet taking the whole people as his disciples and teaching them both the law -- the commands, statutes and judgments -- and no less importantly, the history that lies behind it.

This rises to a climax at the end of the book, in the form of the "song" of Ha'azinu, this week's Parsha, which is preceded and followed by these words: "Moses recited the words of this song from beginning to end in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel" (Deut.

31:30)

"This is the blessing that Moses the man of God pronounced on the Israelites before his death... Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob." (Deut. 33:1, Deut. 33:4)

Note the insistence, in the first of these two verses, on the fact that Moses is speaking to everyone, not an elite. The second passage contains the famous line quoted by Rabbi Yannai's guest as proof that Torah belongs to everyone. It is the possession not of the learned, the elect, the specially-gifted; not of a class or caste. It is the inheritance of the entire congregation of Jacob.

Not until relatively modern times did this idea of universal education spread beyond Judaism. It did not exist even in England, then the premier world power, until the Education Act of 1870. It has taken the Internet revolution -- Google and the rest -- to make it a reality throughout the world. Even today, some 70 million children are still deprived of education, in countries like Somalia, Eritrea, Haiti, Comoros, and Ethiopia.

That education is the key to human dignity and should be equally available to all is one of the most profound ideas in all of history, and it was born in those powerful words, immediately following this week's Parsha: "Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob." *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt'l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“Remember the days of yore, understand the years (shenot) of each generation.” (Deuteronomy 32:7) Are we commanded to study world history? Certainly, I would say, on the basis of the simple meaning of the verse cited at the head of this commentary in accordance with the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808–1888). A proper study of history will reveal the consistent interplay between Israel and the nations of the world, the intellectual streams which influenced us – and in turn – which we influenced, and the hidden finger of God which guaranteed Jewish survival under the most difficult of conditions. And I would argue that the proper translation of the biblical verse cited above, as one may deduce from the biblical commentary of Rabbi Hirsch, is “understand the differences [shenot, not from ‘shana – year,’ but rather from ‘shinui – difference, change’] of each generation.”

It has aptly been said: “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is mystery, today is a gift granted to us by God, and that is why it is called ‘present.’” I would add that “today” is all that we really have to utilize, and we must utilize it well, with wisdom and with dispatch. And we cannot treat “today” with proper understanding and

circumspection unless we are sensitive to the forces of history which preceded it, especially to the changes in zeitgeist (the temper and spirit of the time), which makes “today” different from “yesterday,” and the new opportunities which may enable us to set the stage for a better tomorrow.

The truth is that God revealed Himself to Moses as the God of history. Although in the book of Genesis it is clear that El Sha-ddai or Elo-him is the God of power and creation, when, in the book of Exodus, Moses asks God for His name, the divine response is “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh,” literally, “I shall be what I shall be” (Ex. 3:14). In effect, God is here introducing Himself first and foremost as the God of future tense, the God of history, the God of becoming, the God of future redemption (“Jehovah,” literally “He will bring about” redemption). This is very much in keeping with Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi’s Kuzari, who sees God as revealing Himself in history, based upon the first of the Ten Commandments, “I am the Lord thy God, who took thee out of Egypt, the house of Bondage” (20:2).

This name Ehyeh is very different from Maimonides’ emphasis on the God of creation, Elo-him; indeed, Maimonides interprets Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh as I am that I am, I am the God of being, I am the Ground of Being (Paul Tillich), I am the essence of creation (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Foundations of Torah 1:1).

And this name is not as definitive as is Elo-him, the God of creation. The God of creation “worked” (as it were) alone; in contrast, the God of history is dependent first and foremost on Israel (although redemption was in the divine plan almost immediately after the Exodus, the refusal of Israel to conquer the land delayed the process immeasurably) as well as upon the other nations and their actions. There will eventually be redemption, as all our prophets guarantee in God’s name, but since redemption requires Israel’s intervention, God must leave the “end of days” open-ended.

And so the Bible after presenting the name Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh goes on to say, “So shall you [Moses] say to the children of Israel: ‘The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent Me to you; this is My name forever, and this is My remembrance for all generations’” (Ex. 3:15). Note an interesting linguistic nuance: In Deuteronomy chapter thirty-two, the text reads “dor vador,” understand the differences “of each generation” whereas in Exodus chapter three, we find “dor lador,” “this is My remembrance for all generations.” There are two names of God expressed in this passage in Exodus: the God of the patriarchs is the God of Jewish tradition from generation to generation, the God of eternal Torah and halakhic continuity, the God of the Shulhan Arukh, if you will; the God of history is the God of each generation, with that generation’s specific demands conditioned upon the historical situation of the specific time.

Hence Rabbi Shimon Schwab records in his

memoirs how, as a bar mitzva youth, he went to Raden, anxious to meet with the Chafetz Chayim, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, the gadol hador, the great luminary of the time. The sage asked the youth if he was a Kohen-priest. When young Shimon answered in the negative, the Torah giant commiserated that when the Messiah will come, only he – a Kohen – would be privileged to enter the sacred precincts of the Holy Temple. The reason for the priests' elevated status is that their tribal ancestors answered positively to Moses' call, "Whoever is with God, come to me." Since young Shimon's tribal ancestors did not heed that call, he would be excluded.

The Chafetz Chayim concluded: "And, I do not say these words lightly in order to hurt you. I merely wish to prepare you: in every generation a divine voice calls out the particular summons, challenge, and opportunity of that generation. Do not repeat the mistake of your forebears. Listen for God's voice in your generation, and make sure that you respond to God's call!" ©2024 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

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

The story of the Israelites as found in the Torah is bracketed by song. As the Jews stand victorious over the Egyptians at the sea, they sing. And, poised to enter Israel, ready to cross yet another body of water, again they sing. Indeed, the very name Israel may be interpreted as a composite of *shir-El*, the song of God.

The final song is punctuated by poetic messages expounding deep thoughts worthy of deciphering, and understanding. What follows are a few of these beautiful gems:

- "My doctrine shall drop as rain [*matar*], my speech shall distill as dew [*tal*]" (Deuteronomy 32:2). Rain can be harsh, whereas dew is soft, dropping gently to the ground. Perhaps these two nouns mesh in the recognition that the gateway to the soul is speech, which is strong but humble.

- "The Rock, His work, is perfect [*tamim*]" (Deuteronomy 32:4). Based on this phrase, a Midrash argues that one may not protest God, as He is perfect (Sifrei, Deuteronomy 307). Another Midrash posits that a sign of love is the ability to dissent. Hence, the law that one is liable for lighting a fire that causes damage elsewhere is also interpreted to refer to our raising a voice of moral conscience against God for allowing the Temple to be set aflame (Exodus 22:5; *Pesikta Rabbati* 30. The contrast between these Midrashim was brought to my attention by my son, Dr. Dov Weiss.)

- "He [God] found him [Israel] in a desert land...[and] cared for him" (Deuteronomy 32:10). God's care for Israel is summarized, beginning with protecting the Israelites in the desert. Why not begin the list with God lovingly taking Israel out of Egypt? But Ha'azinu was sung for the second generation, who had not been in Egypt. For them, the Exodus story would not resonate as powerfully, as they were not there. Thus, suggests Nehama Leibowitz, this passage teaches us the importance of assessing one's audience, shaping one's message in ways that can be best received.

- "But Jeshurun [the Israelites] waxed fat and kicked" (Deuteronomy 32:15). In many ways, it is easy to be ethical when weak, when powerless. But when one is "waxing fat," one is in a position to take advantage of others. This is true for anyone in power, including a soldier, clergyperson, a political leader, or a CEO. When

"waxing fat," one too often "kicks" the have-nots and forgets God, without Whom there would be no success.

The Ha'azinu song concludes with the hope that its message not only be true for ourselves but for our people. Indeed, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook takes it to the next level:

There is one who sings the song of his own life.... There is another who sings the song of his people.... There is another who reaches toward more distant realms, and he goes beyond the boundary of Israel to sing the song of humankind... [the song of] all existence (The Lights of Holiness).

This is shir-El, the ultimate song of God. © 2024 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

"Because you trespassed against me amongst the Children of Israel..." (Devarim 32:51) Hashem told Moshe that it was his time to pass away, and let him know that he would receive the same Divine kiss to take his soul as his brother Aharon did. This was to soothe and comfort Moshe. Then, Hashem reminded him of his sin in hitting the rock at Mai Meriva, which is why he could not enter the Land of Israel.

But what happened to Teshuva? Certainly Moshe repented for his mistake and regretted it. This Shabbos we focus on returning to Hashem, as we do the entire Ten Days of Teshuva, but the message here is that it's not enough!

The answer can be found in the explanation of Rashi, who says the problem was that they caused others to rebel against Hashem, and caused Hashem not to be sanctified by His people. In other words, Teshuva works for sins between Man and G-d. However, for sins between people, it's insufficient. One has to appease the others he has harmed (and causing someone to sin is a great harm,) which is why we should be so careful about hurting anyone else.

But what can we do if we don't know who we harmed, or how to make amends? If, after trying to appease the other person several times he doesn't forgive, or if you don't even know who you've harmed, you can pray to Hashem to put it into the other person's heart to forgive you, and resolve not to do it again.

A man who was not particularly careful about his speech, often gossiping and saying negative and harmful things about others, came to a Rabbi. He had decided to change, and needed advice on how to go about it. The Rabbi gave him a very peculiar answer.

"Take a feather pillow into the street, and release its feathers in every direction." The man was perplexed, but his resolve was firm to do as he was advised and change his life. After doing as he was told

he returned to the Rabbi. "What should I do next?" he asked.

"Go back into the street and collect all of the feathers," was the astounding reply. Again, the man made his way into the street and began the daunting task. At his wits' end, he returned to the Rabbi dejectedly, reporting that this was an impossible task.

"Indeed," said the Rabbi. "Remember that your words are like those feathers. Once they leave your mouth, you will never be able to take them back. Make sure the words you allow out are ones you won't have to go chasing after!" © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Hashem, the Rock

Parashat Ha'azinu begins with a poem, a story of the projection of history on the B'nei Yisrael. Moshe chose this final means by which to reach the people because poetry, like the Torah itself, has many different levels of interpretation and speaks to each person where he is at the moment. Moshe began by calling on the people to comprehend the greatness of Hashem.

"When I call out the Name of Hashem, describe greatness to our Elokim. The Rock, perfect is His work, for all His ways are justice; a Keil (another name of Hashem), faithful, without iniquity. 'Righteous,' and it is proper. Corruption is not His – the blemish is His children's, a crooked and twisted generation. Is it to Hashem that you repay this, O people who are vile (alternatively, foolish) and unwise? Is He not your Father, your Acquirer? He made you and established you. Remember the days of old, understand the years of generation after generation. Ask your father and he will relate (it) to you, your elders and they will tell you."

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why Moshe only now, near the end of the Torah, commands the people to praise Hashem when they hear His Name. He quotes Rashi from Gemara Berachot (21) that Moshe was specifically talking about a shira, song or poem. Moshe explained to the people that, "when I call out the Name of Hashem," then the people would answer and, "describe greatness to our Elokim (answer Amen.)" HaRav Sorotzkin, however, points out that this was the third incident of shira in the Torah: (1) when the B'nei Yisrael crossed the Red Sea, (2) when Moshe dug a well for the people and they sang praise to Hashem, (Numbers, 21), and (3) our current shira. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the first shira at the Red Sea was said together with the people so there was no one left to say Amen. The second shira was said only by the people, so Moshe did not begin and the people were not required then to answer. Only in this final shira did Moshe speak and the people then were required to answer with praise to Hashem.

The Rashbam believes that this first sentence is broader than Rashi's explanation. This sentence is also found as an introduction to the prayer recited at a funeral.

This prayer is an acceptance of Hashem's judgment. Hashem's actions which lead to our success or failure, our happiness or sorrow, our health or illness are all part of His judgment and intended for our good. Sometimes our punishment or suffering is to repay our sins while in this world rather than face punishment or suffering after death. Thus, after receiving our punishment or suffering, we must "describe greatness to our Elokim," as an acceptance of Hashem's judgment, which we acknowledge as right.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains why Hashem is called a Rock, "The Rock, perfect is His work." Hirsch explains from the Sifri that there are two aspects of Tzur, Rock that are intended when using this name for Hashem. The first is the concept of strength, the Strong One, while the second concept is the Former, namely, the Creator. Tzur as strength demonstrates that strength as a verb would be "besieging, enclosing, ... putting a strong barrier around, firmly fencing in." Tzur also means to form or to shape. Tzur is used metaphorically "as an expression of this dual conception of unalterable strength and the hardness which overcomes all other material." Hashem is the "absolute power of overcoming everything. He is the absolute origin of all existence and of every manner of existence."

The Ramban sees the Rock as a metaphor of justice. His work is perfect, for, "whatever emanates from Him is perfect and complete, eternally immovable and unchangeable." This is in contrast to the corruption of the people. "Corruption is not His – the blemish is His children's, a crooked and twisted generation." Rashi explains that the corruption of the people is what brings evil into the world. The Sforno explains that the corruption began with the blemish of the Golden Calf. The Ohr HaChaim explains that when the people corrupt their ways, they bring about suffering upon themselves. They also lose the title of Children of Hashem, for only when they follow the path of the Torah can they be considered sons, and when they choose to not follow Hashem, they are called servants (slaves). This is very similar to the way that the Ramban translates this sentence, "The Corruption was towards Him, they are not His children because of their blemish." The Ramban explains that Hashem is perfect and right, and, therefore, His people who sin and stray from His ways cannot be called His children.

Moshe calls the people "am naval v'lo chacham, a foolish people and unwise." The Ramban quotes Onkelos as saying that this is a people "weary of the observance of Torah and they are not wise [enough to realize] that it is for their eternal good." Ibn Ezra describes the people as "foolish in deeds and not wise in heart." The Ramban explains that anyone who pays back his benefactor with evil is considered "naval, vile." The Ramban suggests that the word, "naval" could mean an inferior type of human being, one that has fallen. He compares this to the word for a corpse of an animal that

died without ritual slaughtering as neveilah. This explains Moshe's question, "Is it to Hashem that you repay this, O people who are vile (alternatively, foolish) and unwise?" One who fails to recognize Hashem's gifts to him, it is as if he has fallen.

Moshe continued, "Remember the days of old, understand the years of generation after generation. Ask your father and he will relate (it) to you, your elders and they will tell you." HaRav Hirsch explains that one must "seek an insight into the connections between the successive generations, the generation of Adam, the generation of Enosh, that of the flood and that of the dispersion, follow the path of the development of the generations of Man, and then ask your father about your own history ... your elders who are gifted with wisdom and insight will explain your history to you." The Ramban suggests that this refers to remembering the Creation of the World which will help one to understand what one owes to Hashem.

The concept of History and our knowledge of that History is an important step to our understanding of our task on Earth. Moshe was telling the people that one must understand the progress that Man has made in each generation so that he can assume the responsibility of leading the world forward in its progression towards what Hashem desires from each person. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

After Moshe taught the song of Haazinu to the nation (Devarim 32:42), G-d told him to go up to Har Nevo and see the land He is giving to them (32:49). This mountain is referenced in the Torah four times. In Bamidbar (27:12) it's called הר העברים; in Devarim (3:27) it's referred to as ראש הפסגה, then (32:49) as both הר העברים and הר נבו, and finally (34:1) as הר נבו and ראש הפסגה.

There's a mountain in Jordan (in the area of Arvos Moav) called Mount Nebo, which is said to offer a spectacular view of the western side of the Jordan Valley. There are several (non-Jewish) religious sites there, based on their tradition that this is the very mountain where Moshe viewed the Promised Land before he died and where he is buried. (Whether Moshe was buried on Har Nevo is a matter of discussion; stay tuned!) Is Mount Nebo the biblical Har Nevo?

Yoel Elitzur (Places in the Parasha, Haazinu), writes that "the location of Mount Nebo [referring to Har Nevo] is known; an ancient tradition places it on a rocky spur about half a mile above sea level, overlooking the plains of Moab, at a site called Khirbet Siyagha." He adds that "the ancient name 'Nebo' has been preserved there by the Arabs in the form 'Niba.'" However, he then quotes Ze'ev Erlich, who points out that the mountain range just east of Mount Nebo is taller than Mount Nebo, and therefore blocks any view to the east. Since G-d told

Moshe (Devarim 3:27) to look in all directions – including east – from Har Nevo, Erlich thinks Har Nevo is one of the mountains east of Mount Nebo, from where Moshe could have seen the land on all four sides. I would point out that when the lands Moshe saw from atop Har Nevo are described (34:1-3), no area east of Arvos Moav is mentioned – despite an area east of the Jordan (“הגלעד,” which is north of Arvos Moav) that had already been conquered (so Moshe could have gone there before he died, and perhaps did), being included. It’s therefore possible that the four directions mentioned all refer to the land west of the Jordan River – Canaan – i.e. its western part, its northern part, its southern part and its eastern part (see Malbim on Devarim 3:27), none of which were east of Har Nevo. But even if it meant east of Moshe’s location, since it was physically impossible to see as far north, west and south as is described from Mount Nebo, just as Moshe’s vision miraculously extended beyond any physical limitations (see Or HaChaim on Devarim 3:27), perhaps he was able to “see” beyond the physical limitation of having a mountain in the way. Additionally, if his “view” was a spiritual one, it wouldn’t be blocked by the physical mountain to his east.

Although the verses refer to Har Nevo by three names, numerous Midrashim (e.g. Sifre Zuta Bamidbar 27:12, Sifre Devarim 338, Yalkut Shimoni 949, Midrash Hagadol Bamidbar 20:23/27:12 and Devarim 32:49) add a fourth – Hor Hahar – with some adding that Moshe, Aharon and Miriam were all buried there. This is quite puzzling, since Miriam was buried in Kadesh (Bamidbar 20:1), which is near Edom (20:16), and Aharon was buried in Hor HaHar (20:22-29), which is also near Edom (20:23). Even though Kadesh and Hor HaHar are close enough to each other for Miriam and Aharon to have been buried on different parts of the same mountain, Edom is south of the Dead Sea, while Arvos Moav (where Moshe died) is north of the Dead Sea. How could all three be buried on the same mountain, and how could Hor HaHar be another name for Har Nevo?

When Yalkut Shimoni (777, on Bamidbar 27:12) says that “elsewhere הר העברים is called הר ההר,” the Mosad HaRav Kook edition says the “elsewhere” is Devarim 32:50. That verse is usually translated as Moshe being told he will die on Har Nevo the way Aharon died on Hor HaHar, but they are assuming that this Midrash is translating it as Moshe being told he will also die on Hor HaHar. No matter how we understand Midrashic expoundations, the layer this Midrash is exposing is that the Torah is also telling us that Moshe and Aharon died on the same mountain, which is geographically difficult.

Most mountains are part of a mountain range, a series of mountains located near each other, in a row, connected by high ground, that often share the same geological origin. Whether mountains are part of the same mountain range (or form one) can be subjective, but if you look at the topography of the area just to the

east of the Dead Sea, and follow it south to the Gulf of Aqaba, there’s a row of mountains that starts at Har Nevo and continues south until Har Seir (including Har Seir), the mountain range that runs along the edge of Edom. If this row of mountains is considered one mountain range, and the intent of the Midrash is that all three are buried on the same mountain range, this geographic difficulty has been solved, as Hor HaHar and Har Nevo (as well as the mountain near Kadesh where Miriam was buried) are all part of the same mountain range.

This suggestion – that the Midrashim that add a fourth name are referring to the mountain range rather than a specific mountain within that range – can also explain how some of these same Midrashim (e.g. Sifre Devarim 37 and Yalkut Shimoni on Nevi’im 24) say the mountain had only three names (the ones in the verses), as there they are referring to the specific mountain where Moshe died. [As far as why there isn’t a fifth name – Har Seir – if it’s also part of the same mountain range, since no one referred to the whole range as Har Seir, that name did not include Har Nevo. It should be noted that Har Seir itself seems to be the name of the mountain range south of the Dead Sea, and not just one specific mountain; I am suggesting that this mountain range extends north all the way to Har Nevo, with only the southern part called Har Seir, while the entire range is sometimes referred to by one of the significant mountains in the range, i.e. the range that contains Har Nevo.]

Getting back to whether Mount Nebo is really Har Nevo, if Hor HaHar is part of the same mountain range as Har Nevo, then Mount Nebo and Har Nevo must be the same mountain, as the mountains to the east of Mount Nebo are not part of that same mountain range. ©2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Ten Days of Repentance or "Aseret Yemei Teshuvah" begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur. The Shabbat during The Ten Days of Repentance is known as "Shabbat Shuvah -- Shabbat of Return" because of the reading from the Prophets on this Shabbat begins with the words "Shuvah Yisrael -- Return O Israel" (Hosea 14:1).

As you may have divined from the name, this Shabbat is dedicated to focusing on improving one’s behavior, and in most synagogues the rabbi delivers a sermon on the topic of repentance.

This is the time of year when we pay close attention to our deeds and how we act. We must identify the triggers that cause us to behave in ways of which we are not proud and pledge to take affirmative steps to change those behaviors in the future. We examine our relationship with the Almighty, our relationship with one another, and our relationship with ourselves. In each of

these crucial relationships we must take responsibility for our failures and recommit to meet the expectations of that relationship.

I am reminded of the following joke. A man woke up one morning deeply repentant after a bitter fight with his wife the previous evening. When he went downstairs, he noticed, with some dismay, that on the dining room table sat the crate of beer bottles that had caused the fight. He took it outside and started smashing the empty bottles one by one against the wall.

He smashed the first bottle yelling, "You are the reason I fight with my wife!" He smashed the second bottle, "You are the reason my children don't respect me!" He smashed the third bottle, "You are the reason I don't have a decent job!"

When he picked up the fourth bottle, he realized that the bottle was actually still sealed and full. He hesitated for a moment, torn about what he should do. He finally said, "You stand aside; I know you were not involved."

Of course, this week's Torah portion has a particularly relevant message related to this topic: "The Rock, perfect is His work, for all His ways are justice [...]" (32:4).

The great medieval commentator known as Rashi explains (ad loc) that this verse is teaching us an important lesson regarding the Almighty's system of justice. Even though God is omnipotent and has every means at His disposal, when He punishes those who transgress His will, He doesn't visit upon them a tsunami of punishment. Instead, He metes out punishment in accord with a strict attribute of justice. In other words, God only doles out a punishment to fit the crime -- because "perfect is His work."

Still, one must wonder what other option might have been acceptable. Meaning, why would we presume that God would punish a transgression in a more severe manner than is called for? One would expect the King Who built the world on the attribute of absolute justice would also abide the laws of justice. How is it even possible to consider that God might deliver more retribution than a sin actually deserves?

The Torah records a fascinating comment made by Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. Jethro, upon hearing all the wondrous miracles that the Almighty performed while taking the Jewish nation out of Egypt, declared: "Now I know that the Almighty is greater than all other gods [...]" (Exodus 18:11).

Our sages teach that Jethro found it most remarkable that the Almighty punished the Egyptians measure for measure. Pharaoh had decreed that all the Jewish males be cast into the river to be drowned. Thus, the Almighty visited upon the Egyptians exactly the same punishment and drowned them in the Red Sea, i.e. in the manner they chose to destroy the Jewish nation, God destroyed them.

Additionally, even while the Egyptian army was

being drowned in the Red Sea, their individual punishments differed (see Rashi's comments on Exodus 15:5). Each Egyptian was punished according to his individual wickedness (e.g. the most wicked were painfully thrashed around by the waves before drowning, while others sank to the bottom immediately without enduring added suffering).

The sages teach us that Jethro was so moved by this concept -- that God's system of justice mandates that punishment be delivered measure for measure -- that this realization became the catalyst for his conversion to Judaism. But, once again, how is it possible for the Almighty to respond in any other way than that of absolute justice? Why did this make such a powerful impression on Jethro? In today's world, there are truly astounding incongruities between different societies when it comes to assigning a punishment to "fit the crime." In many countries, possessing drugs with an intent to sell is a capital offense. In the Philippines, for example, a person who is apprehended with only 1/3 of an ounce of a drug can be put to death.

If one connects to another person's Wi-Fi in Singapore (without their permission) it is considered "hacking" and punishable by a \$10,000 fine and three years in jail. Last year Hong Kong raised the penalty for littering; now, dropping a cigarette butt on the street will set you back \$3,000. Selling gum in Singapore is a serious crime and smuggling it in is punishable by a fine of \$100,000. There are many examples of this sort of "justice" throughout the world.

The purpose of these "crazy" laws is to have consequences so severe that it totally discourages the prohibited behavior. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this system actually works. No one hacks another's Wi-Fi in Singapore. Visitors to Hong Kong always marvel that it is an unbelievably clean city (a friend of mine who lived in Hong Kong told me that he would be comfortable eating off the floor in the subway) and as you might imagine, there are very few drug issues in the Philippines. These countries have very successfully deterred unwanted behavior in their citizens.

These systems of justice seem to work quite well -- so why doesn't the Almighty act in this way? It would certainly keep more people on the "straight and narrow!"

To properly understand this, we need to contrast mankind's perspective with the worldview of the Almighty. People live in a very self-centered universe; we generally filter everything that happens around us by how we are personally affected by said events. For example, if a fellow congregant is talking loudly in the synagogue, we angrily "shush" them because it annoys us -- and not because we want to help them behave properly in a synagogue. When we display anger, it should be the first clue that we are making the issue about us and not them.

We do the same thing with our children and spouses. When we get upset at a spouse or a child for

leaving their clothes on the floor or not cleaning up after themselves, typically it is not because we are trying to improve them as people. We get annoyed because we feel that they are being inconsiderate by creating more work for us. We all live in a self-centered universe, and only occasionally do we step out of it to try and genuinely help others.

By contrast, God has zero "self-interest" -- His sole interest in creation was to devise a system in which mankind could grow through self-improvement by making the proper life choices. It is these choices that bring us closer to the Almighty and deepens our relationship with Him. Because of this, God is not interested in forcing a change in people's behavior -- you cannot force a relationship.

The Almighty loves His children and is solely interested in their growth. He has no desire to control their behavior. God simply wants us to make the proper decisions and experience personal growth and become better people. Unfortunately, a person's growth sometimes must come through pain.

Because of this, there is a lesson to each and every one of the Almighty's retributions. This is the reason that God doles out punishments measure for measure -- so that people will learn from their suffering and identify what they did wrong and what specifically they need to improve. Thus, every time we experience something unpleasant we must ask ourselves: What is the Almighty trying to tell me?

This insight is what Jethro observed regarding God's system of justice, and he recognized it to be a very empowering message. Judaism has a unique view of God and His relationship with mankind. All of God's actions are just and without self-interest. Thus, the Almighty only acts in our best interest, He does not wish to try and control our actions. God enables us to grow by guiding us to the proper path in life to follow. It was this understanding of how God relates to the world that impelled Jethro to convert to Judaism.

I'd like to wish my readers around the world a Shana Tova -- A Good Year -- filled with good blessings, good health, and good tidings. May we turn the page on all the tragedies of the prior year and look forward to a year of peace and prosperity for all of mankind. © 2024 Rabbi Y. Zweig and *shabbatshalom.org*

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

Our Parashah opens: "Ha'azinu / Give ear, heavens, and I will speak; Ve'tishma / and may the earth hear the words of my mouth." R' Yissachar Shlomo Teichtel z"l Hy"d (1885-1945; rabbi and Rosh Yeshiva in Pietany, Czechoslovakia) writes: The difference between the two types of listening referred to in our verse -- Ha'azanah and Shemi'a -- is that the former refers to listening to something until one understands it very well, while the latter refers to hearing even without

understanding. The "heavens" -- i.e., Torah scholars who busy themselves with heavenly matters -- are called upon to study Torah until they understand it. And, says the second half of the verse, even those who will be unable to understand the Torah in depth because they are forced to busy themselves with earthly matters should listen to their rabbi's Torah lessons.

What is the purpose of listening if one will not understand? The very next verse answers this question, R' Teichtel writes. "May my teaching drop like the rain..." Raindrops have no idea why they are falling; they simply do G-d's bidding, and the beneficial results follow automatically. So it is with Torah learning; even if one does not expect to understand, his soul benefits from being exposed to the Torah.

One might think, continues R' Teichtel, that that result will occur only if the teacher is an extremely G-d-fearing, top-tier Torah scholar. No, continues the Torah, "When I call out the Name of Hashem, you [plural] ascribe greatness to our Elokim." The plural pronoun teaches that the truth is beloved no matter from whom it comes. (Mishneh Sachir)



"They would provoke His jealousy with strangers..." (32:16) R' Ze'ev Wolf Olesker z"l (1700-1777; Galicia and Eretz Yisrael) writes: This is a rebuke to students of Torah who interrupt their studies with idle chatter or to discuss current events, sometimes willing away a full hour or two. (The idle chatter or discussion of current events is a "stranger" to the Torah study that is supposed to be taking place.)

R' Olesker continues, citing earlier works of Mussar: At first glance, such conversations merely violate a Mitzvat Aseh / affirmative commandment, specifically (Devarim 6:7), "You shall speak of them" -- which the Gemara (Yoma 19b) understands as a Mitzvah to speak words of Torah and not other things. Violating a Mitzvat Aseh is the least stringent type of sin that exists. However, unlike more serious sins, such as stealing, the opportunity to commit this transgression arises every single day -- indeed, multiple times every day. The frequency of this transgression converts it into a very serious sin. (Derashot Ha'Razah)

We read (Mishlei 17:27), "One who is sparing with his words knows knowledge, and a man of understanding speaks sparingly." R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) explains: King Shlomo, the author of Mishlei, is not advocating that a person sit silently as if he is mute. Indeed, a person is supposed to be sociable ("Me'orav im ha'beriyot"). Furthermore, a person often needs to speak to accomplish whatever he

needs to get done. Nevertheless, King Shlomo is advocating that we speak sparingly when it is not necessary to speak. (Netiv Ha'shetikah ch.1) © 2024 S. Katz & *torah.org*

