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# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L**

## Covenant & Conversation

Happiness, said Aristotle, is the ultimate goal at which all humans aim. (Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1) But in Judaism it is not necessarily so. Happiness is a high value. Ashrei, the closest Hebrew word to happiness, is the first word of the book of Psalms. We say the prayer known as Ashrei three times each day. We can surely endorse the phrase in the American Declaration of Independence that among the inalienable rights of humankind are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But Ashrei is not the central value of the Hebrew Bible. Occurring almost ten times as frequently is the word simcha, joy. It is one of the fundamental themes of Deuteronomy as a book. The root s-m-ch appears only once in each of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, but no less than twelve times in Deuteronomy. It lies at the heart of the Mosaic vision of life in the land of Israel. That is where we serve G-d with joy.

Joy plays a key role in two contexts in this week's parsha. One has to do with the bringing of first-fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. After describing the ceremony that took place, the Torah concludes: "Then you will rejoice in all the good things that the Lord your G-d has given you and your family, along with the Levites and the stranger in your midst" (26:11).

The other context is quite different and astonishing. It occurs in the context of the curses. There are two passages of curses in the Torah, one in Leviticus 26, the other here in Deuteronomy 28. The differences are notable. The curses in Leviticus end on a note of hope. Those in Deuteronomy end in bleak despair. The Leviticus curses speak of a total abandonment of Judaism by the people. The people walk be-keri with G-d, variously translated as 'with hostility,' 'rebelliously,' or 'contemptuously.' But the curses in Deuteronomy are provoked simply "because you did not serve the Lord your G-d with joy and gladness of heart out of the abundance of all things" (28:47).

Now, joylessness may not be the best way to live, but it is surely not even a sin, let alone one that warrants a litany of curses. What does the Torah mean when it attributes national disaster to a lack of joy? Why does joy seem to matter in Judaism more than happiness? To answer these questions we have first to understand the difference between happiness and joy. This is how the first Psalm describes the happy life: "Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners or sat where scoffers sit. But his desire is in the Torah of the Lord; on his Torah he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, bearing its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in all that he does he prospers." (Ps. 1:1-3)

This is a serene and blessed life, granted to one who lives in accordance with the Torah. Like a tree, such a life has roots. It is not blown this way and that by every passing wind or whim. Such people bear fruit, stay firm, survive and thrive. Yet for all that, happiness is the state of mind of an individual.

Simcha in the Torah is never about individuals. It is always about something we share. A newly married man does not serve in the army for a year, says the Torah, so that he can stay at home "and bring joy to the wife he has married" (Deut. 24:5). You shall bring all your offerings to the central sanctuary, says Moses, so that "There, in the presence of the Lord your G-d, you and your families shall eat and rejoice in all you have put your hand to, because the Lord your G-d has blessed you." (Deut. 12:7). The festivals as described in Deuteronomy are days of joy, precisely because they are occasions of collective celebration: "you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless and the widows living among you" (16:11). Simcha is joy shared. It is not something we experience in solitude.

Happiness is an attitude to life as a whole, while joy lives in the moment. As J. D. Salinger once said: "Happiness is a solid, joy is a liquid." Happiness is something you pursue. But joy is not. It discovers you. It has to do with a sense of connection to other people or to G-d. It comes from a different realm than happiness. It is a social emotion. It is the exhilaration we feel when we merge with others. It is the redemption of solitude.

Paradoxically, the biblical book most focused on joy is precisely the one often thought of as the unhappiest of all, Kohelet, a.k.a. Ecclesiastes. Kohelet is notoriously the man who had everything, yet describes it all as hevel, a word he uses almost forty times in the space of the book, and variously translated

as 'meaningless, pointless, futile, empty,' or as the King James Bible famously rendered it, 'vanity.' In fact, though, Kohelet uses the word simcha seventeen times, that is, more than the whole of the Mosaic books together. After every one of his meditations on the pointlessness of life, Kohelet ends with an exhortation to joy: "I know that there is nothing better for people than to rejoice and do good while they live." (3:12)

"So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to rejoice in his work, because that is his lot." (3:22)

"So I commend rejoicing in life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and rejoice." (8:15)

"However many years anyone may live, let him rejoice in them all." (11:8)

My argument is that Kohelet can only be understood if we realise that hevel does not mean 'pointless, empty, or futile.' It means 'a shallow breath.' Kohelet is a meditation on mortality. However long we live, we know we will one day die. Our lives are a mere microsecond in the history of the universe. The cosmos lasts for ever while we, living, breathing mortals, are a mere fleeting breath.

Kohelet is obsessed by this because it threatens to rob life of any certainty. We will never live to see the long-term results of our endeavours. Moses did not lead the people into the Promised Land. His sons did not follow him to greatness. Even he, the greatest of prophets, could not foresee that he would be remembered for all time as the greatest leader the Jewish people ever had. Lehavdil, Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime. He could not have known that he would eventually be hailed as one of the greatest painters of modern times. We do not know what our heirs will do with what we leave them. We cannot know how, or if, we will be remembered. How then are we to find meaning in life?

Kohelet eventually finds it not in happiness but in joy -- because joy lives not in thoughts of tomorrow, but in the grateful acceptance and celebration of today. We are here; we are alive; we are among others who share our sense of jubilation. We are living in G-d's land, enjoying His blessing, eating the produce of His earth, watered by His rain, brought to fruition under His sun, breathing the air He breathed into us, living the life He renews in us each day. And yes, we do not know what tomorrow may bring; and yes, we are surrounded by enemies; and yes, it was never the safe or easy option to be a Jew. But when we focus on the moment, allowing ourselves to dance, sing and give thanks, when we do things for their own sake not for any other reward, when we let go of our separateness and become a voice in the holy city's choir, then there is joy.

Kierkegaard once wrote: "It takes moral courage to grieve; it takes religious courage to rejoice." (Journals and Papers, vol. 2, Bloomington, Indiana University Pre ss, 1967, p. 493) It is one of the most poignant facts about Judaism and the Jewish people that our history has been shot through with tragedy, yet Jews never lost the capacity to rejoice, to celebrate in the heart of darkness, to sing the Lord's song even in a strange land. There are eastern faiths that promise peace of mind if we can train ourselves into habits of acceptance. Epicurus taught his disciples to avoid risks like marriage or a career in public life. Neither of these approaches is to be negated, yet Judaism is not a religion of acceptance, nor have Jews tended to seek the risk-free life. We can survive the failures and defeats if we never lose the capacity for joy. On Sukkot, we leave the security and comfort of our houses and live in a shack exposed to the wind, the cold and the rain. Yet we call it zeman simchatenu, our season of joy. That is no small part of what it is to be a Jew.

Hence Moses' insistence that the capacity for joy is what gives the Jewish people the strength to endure. Without it, we become vulnerable to the multiple disasters set out in the curses in our parsha. Celebrating together binds us as a people: that and the gratitude and humility that come from seeing our achievements not as self-made but as the blessings of G-d. The pursuit of happiness can lead, ultimately, to self-regard and indifference to the sufferings of others. It can lead to risk-averse behaviour and a failure to 'dare greatly.' Not so, joy. Joy connects us to others and to G-d. Joy is the ability to celebrate life as such, knowing that whatever tomorrow may bring, we are here today, under G-d's heaven, in the universe He made, to which He has invited us as His guests.

Toward the end of his life, having been deaf for twenty years, Beethoven composed one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, his Ninth Symphony. Intuitively he sensed that this work needed the sound of human voices. It became the West's first choral symphony. The words he set to music were Schiller's Ode to Joy. I think of Judaism as an ode to joy. Like Beethoven, Jews have known suffering, isolation, hardship and rejection, yet they never lacked the religious courage to rejoice. A people that can know insecurity and still feel joy is one that can never be defeated, for its spirit can never be broken nor its hope destroyed. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* 

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

# Shabbat Shalom

"When you come to the land which the Lord your God gives to you as an inheritance and you inherit it…. You shall take from the first of all the fruits of the earth which you shall bring from your land…. And you shall respond and you shall say before the Lord your God: 'My father was a wandering

Aramean.'" (Deuteronomy 26:1–2, 5) The Mishna in Bikkurim magnificently describes the drama of the bringing of these first fruits, the massive march to Jerusalem of farmers from all over Israel with the choicest fruit and grain of their labors in their hands, the decorated marketplaces of our Holy City crowned by the magnificent fruits, and the speech-song of each individual farmer as he stood in front of the Temple altar with the offering he handed to the priest. What an impressive demonstration of fealty to the Master of the Universe, who is hereby recognized as the Provider of all produce and the Sustainer of all sustenance.

But God's bounty was not the purpose of bringing the first fruits. The clear emphasis here is the arrival of the Israelites to the Land of Israel – after having been enslaved and afflicted by the Egyptians, and after the Almighty heard their prayers and took them from Egypt to Israel with great miracles and wonders. Eating the fruits of our own land emphasizes the evils of slavery when we could not produce our own food and the inalienable rights of Jews (as well as all humans) to freedom and the independence to provide for their own needs.

From this perspective I can understand why the first fruits are only to be brought from the seven species which are unique and bring praise to the Land of Israel (Deut. 8), and why only an individual who owns a portion of the Land of Israel and on whose portion the fruits actually grew is obligated to perform the command of the first fruits (Mishna, Bikkurim 1:1–3). This commandment is all about God's gift of the Land of Israel to the Jews; that is why we find that in the eleven verses of the first fruits speech-song, the noun "land (eretz)," appears no fewer than five times, and the verb "gift (matan)" [by God] no fewer than seven times!

To further cement the inextricable relationship between the first fruits and the Land of Israel, Rabbi Elĥanan Samet (in his masterful biblical commentary) cites a comment by Rabbi Menaĥem Ziemba (Ĥiddushim, siman 50) in the name of the Holy Ari, that the commandment to bring the first fruits is a repair, a tikkun, for the Sin of the Scouts. Perhaps that is why the Mishna links the command of the first fruits specifically to the fig, grape, and pomegranate ("If an individual goes into his field and sees a fig, a grape-cluster and/or a pomegranate which has/have ripened, he must tie them with a cord and state that these are to be first fruits" – Bikkurim 3:1), precisely the three fruits which the scouts took back with them (Num. 13:23).

And the Bible relates to the scouts on their reconnaissance mission with the very same language that God commands the Israelite concerning the first fruits: Moses tells the scouts, "And you shall take from the fruits of the land" (13:20), "We came to the land… and it is even flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit" (13:27), and – in remarkably parallel fashion – God commands the Israelites, "And you shall take from the first of all the fruits of the land" (Deut. 26:2), "Because I have come to the land" (26:3), "And He gave to us this land flowing with milk and honey" (26:9).

In effect, God is saying that we must bring precisely those first fruits from that very special land which the scouts rejected, or at least lacked the faith to conquer and settle.

Fulfilling the command of the first fruits is in effect a gesture of "repentance" for the Sin of the Scouts. And in similar fashion, all of us privileged to return to Israel after 2000 years of exile are similarly repenting for the sin of the Scouts! 

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

# Wein Online

One of the bitterest curses that the Torah describes in the tochacha, which forms a major portion of this parsha, is that all our efforts will be for naught, all our ambitions, ideas and struggles ultimately pointless and of no lasting value, unless we build strong family ties and encourage harmony. There are relatively few ways that we can make our mark on the world and our lives, unless we are able to see the accomplishments of others, ideally through our offspring and close relatives.

That is the reason that family relations, especially parent-child relationships, are so delicate and emotional. Even if one feels that one's efforts in life have been successful, the verdict on our achievements is yet to be rendered and that depends upon the continuing success of our future generations. Therefore the words of the tochacha are truly frightening, for they portend that future generations can undo all previous achievements of their predecessors. We are all too bitterly aware that this is true especially in our generatrions.

This inconsonance between generations is emphasized further in the tochacha when the Torah describes "that your children shall be given to another nation and that you will be powerless to prevent it." The Torah refers here not only to actual enslavement and imprisonment of one's children but it also implies being given to a foreign, non-Jewish culture and way of life. The effects of the secularization of the youthful generations of Eastern European Jewry and of American and Israeli Jewry are so serious as to be almost catastrophic.

Our generation and times are left to pay the bill for those previous defections from Jewish life. And, what the appeal of false ideals that overwhelmed the Jewish street then did not destroy, the Holocaust, described in minute detail in the tochacha -- completed. If it were not for God's promise that ends the tochacha, that Israel will survive and rejuvenate itself, we would almost be without hope or comfort. But it is the sad fact that the tochacha, in all of its awful prophecies and

events, has literally taken place before our eyes. And, this paradoxically gives us the hope and promise for the better times that God's promise extends to us.

As we contemplate the shambles of the tochacha that surround us currently, we may take hope in the future -- that the times of peace, spiritual accomplishment and serenity of soul will also be literally fulfilled in the great and good year that is about to dawn upon us and all of Israel. 

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

# Shabbat Forshpeis

A central part of the Passover Seder is the study of four verses found in Parashat Ki Tavo, beginning with "Arami oved avi." The verses were said by the farmer who brings first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem, recounting the history of the Jews settling in Egypt, being enslaved by Pharaoh, crying out to God for help, and finally being freed (Deuteronomy 26:5–8).

One wonders: Why should verses from Deuteronomy rather than sections of the Book of Exodus, in which the story unfolded, be recited at the Seder table? Several answers come to mind.

The portion of the first fruits instructs the native Israeli to thank God for his bounty. Although not personally enslaved in Egypt, he recalls the Egyptian experience in the first person as if he were there. Hence, this text is read on Passover night, as it is our challenge not only to "retell" the story of the Exodus but to "reenact" the event as if we, living thousands of years later, were in Egypt.

Rabbi David Silber offers an alternative approach. Paradoxically, he argues, only the people who were not in Egypt can fully understand that bondage. In fact, the slaves who left wanted to return – as they never fully comprehended what it meant to leave Egypt (Numbers 14:3, 4; 16:12–14). Only a free people could attain the proper perspective to recognize that the experience in Egypt may not have been a punishment but a covenantal opportunity.

And it ought to be noted that, while eyewitnesses to an event can offer an account that those not there cannot, assessing an event from a distance can be more objective. Reviewing a matter years or even decades after it unfolded may yield greater clarity on what happened.

While the above reflections relate to how memory can best be preserved, another approach focuses on how the Deuteronomy verses are more suitable for the Seder.

The Psalmist writes that it is not enough to "leave evil;" it is crucial to take the next step and "do good" (Psalms 34:15). Hence, the Deuteronomy text is studied at the Seder as it presents the prayer said when bringing the first fruits, which teaches that leaving slavery only had meaning if followed by entry into the Jewish land. While the Seder predominantly retells the Exodus, tucked into the Passover story is the centrality of Israel.

More expansively, as my dear friend David Lowenfeld pointed out to me, we must note the iterations of the verb natan (to give) in the Deuteronomy paragraph from which arami oved avi is lifted. In a verse quoted at the Seder, we recall the Egyptians "placing upon us [va'yitnu aleinu] hard bondage" (Deuteronomy 26:6). This image exists in stark contrast to the image of God, Who in the larger Deuteronomy passage is described as giving (va'yiten, natan) us the Land of Israel and all its goodness (26:9, 11), expecting, in the spirit of imitatio Dei, that we provide for the landless (Levi) and the vulnerable (the ger [stranger]; 26:12–13).

And so, at the Seder, we move well beyond the Exodus story and allude to the broader goal of leaving Egypt – to place ourselves on a "spiritual high" (u'l'titcha elyon) by leading just and ethical lives (26:19). 

**ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT**

# Eating the First Fruits

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

Parshat Ki Tavo touches on the *mitzvot* of *bikurim* (first fruits) and *ma'aser sheni* (a tithe consumed in Jerusalem). However, the details relevant to eating them are found elsewhere. The mitzva of eating *bikurim* appears in *Devarim* 12:5-6, and the mitzva of eating *ma'aser sheni* is in *Devarim* 14:23.

Not only are these two *mitzvot* mentioned in Ki Tavo in close proximity to each other, but they have many similarities (for example, they are both eaten in Jerusalem in a state of purity). Accordingly, our Sages apply the laws of one to the other. There are some differences, though. For example, *ma'aser sheni* is eaten in Jerusalem by its owners, while *bikurim* are presented to the *Kohanim* when the owners arrive in Jerusalem.

The declaration said when bringing *ma'aser sheni* to Jerusalem includes the phrase: "I have not eaten of it while in mourning" (*Devarim* 26:14). This means a person is required to eat *ma'aser sheni* joyfully. When he is mourning and shrouded in sorrow, he may not eat it. Because we apply the rules of *ma'aser sheni* to *bikurim*, a *Kohen* who is in mourning may not eat *bikurim*. Others derive the latter rule from the verse that states regarding *bikurim* that "You shall enjoy all the bounty" (*Devarim* 26:11). This requirement of joy applies not only to the field owners who bring

their fruit to the *Kohen*, but also to the *Kohen* who is privileged to eat the fruit of the Holy Land.

The mitzva of eating *bikurim* is so important that the *Kohen* who eats *bikurim* makes a special blessing (just as he does before reciting the priestly blessing): "*Asher kideshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu le'echol bikurim*" ("Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to eat *bikurim*").



**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

# Cursed is the One

Parashat Ki Tavo contains the second Tochacha, a warning from Hashem through Moshe containing the curses that will occur to the B'nei Yisrael should they stray from the path of Hashem's Torah after entering the Land. Prior to the long set of warnings, half of the B'nei Yisrael would stand on Mount Gerizim and half on Mount Eival while a series of blessings and curses were shouted for all to hear, followed by the entire nation answering "Amein, I believe and accept." These curses are different than the general warning as they target specific behaviors.

The Torah tells us which specific behaviors are cursed: "Cursed is the man who shall make a graven or molten image, an abomination of Hashem, a craftsman's handiwork, and emplace it in secret, …. Cursed is one who degrades his father or mother, …. Cursed is one who moves the boundary of his fellow, …. Cursed is one who causes a blind person to go astray on the path, …. Cursed is one who perverts a judgment of a convert, orphan, or widow, …. Cursed is one who lies with the wife of his father, for he will have uncovered the robe of his father, …. Cursed is one who lies with an animal, …. Cursed is one who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother, …. Cursed is one who lies with his mother-in-law, …. Cursed is one who strikes his fellow stealthily, …. Cursed is one who takes a bribe to kill a person of innocent blood, …. Cursed is one who will not uphold the words of this Torah, to perform them …." Each of these statements is followed by the words in the Torah, "and the entire people will answer Amein."

Rashi draws our attention to the beginning of this section where it described the six tribes who would stand on Har Eival and the six tribes who would stand on Har Gerizim. He is bothered by the words of the Torah, "These will stand to bless the nation…." Since this is mentioned first, one would assume that the Torah would now list the blessings before the curses. Rashi explains that the Kohanim and Leviim, who stood in the valley between these two mountains, would first turn to Har Gerizim and say the blessing, "Blessed is one who shall not make a graven or molten image…," and the people would say Amein. After this they would turn to Har Eival and call out the equivalent curse listed here, and the people would answer Amein.

The ibn Ezra explains that each of these curses had a blessing counterpart, even though the blessing is not spelled out in the Torah. Part of the reason why it was not found in the Torah is that it would appear awkward to say that a person is blessed for not making an idol or a molten image. This does not contradict Rashi's view but comes to explain why the blessings were not listed here. He explains that the reason for the inclusion of these curses is that each they can be done in private, and if they were done in public or with public knowledge, they would be punishable by death.

The Baal HaTurim explains the order of these curses. The Torah begins with the sin of idol worship, since that sin is the negation of the entire Torah. The commandments depend on a single Commander, Hashem. The Torah connects this sin to the sin of degrading one's parents, as parents are connected to Hashem as partners in the creation of any new child. The Torah then connects degrading of one's parents to moving the boundary of one's fellow. One who does not recognize the importance of his parents, will not recognize borders, and will not recognize that being with another man's wife is like moving his border, causing him a loss. The Torah then connects moving one's neighbor's border to causing a blind person to stray from the path. This is a warning to not deceive your neighbor to follow your advice which is only beneficial to yourself, as that is similar to moving his border to benefit only you.

There are several aspects of these statements which are important to note. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the Rashbam said that each of the people who are cursed in this section has performed these sins in private or in secret. The Or HaChaim explains that the cases listed here of inappropriate sexual relationships are not necessarily the worst of the inappropriate ones, but those of incest which are secretive by nature. Since such close relatives are more likely to love one another naturally and be drawn to sin, only these cases of inappropriate relations are found in this section.

Rashi explains "strikes his fellow stealthily" as a form of gossip. The Baal HaTurim makes the same deduction because the word "sater, stealthily," has the numerical equivalent of the term "lashon hara, gossip." The Baal HaTurim also explains that the numerical value also equals "masar mamon chavero, causing a financial loss to one's friend." This also keeps with the theme of secretive sins which cause damage to others though they may not be aware of the damage.

There is a difference of opinion concerning one aspect of the curses. Some of the commentaries do not include the final curse in the number of curses as it is a more generalized curse. Rashi, ibn Ezra, and the Kli Yakar speak of eleven curses comparing them to eleven tribes. Yet it is clear that if we include the last curse that there are twelve curses representing all

twelve tribes. Rashi quotes Reb Moshe HaDarshan who explains that no curse was said for Shimon because each curse was accompanied by a blessing and he had no intention to bless Shimon before he died as he blessed the other tribes. The Siftei Chachamim explains that it was Shimon who suggested killing Yosef, so Reb Moshe HaDarshan excluded Shimon from the blessing. He then posits that Reb Moshe HaDarshan should have excluded Reuven from the blessing also because of taking his father's wife or Yosef for having spread gossip about his brothers. One possible solution to this problem is that the last curse, not upholding the Torah, is taken literally to mean not lifting the Torah and turning it so all can see or not placing the scroll upright in the Ark so that it might fall. Neither of these actions comfortably fit the concept of secret sins, unless one wishes to say that not showing the Torah to others makes it secretive.

The Torah warns us that we are deluding ourselves if we think that any of our sins are hidden from Hashem. It is clear that these laws are of an even more serious delusion, since these are laws which would carry the death penalty if they were known to others and brought before the courts. We are reminded at this time of year that there is only one Court that matters, and there are no secrets in that Court. *© 2022 Rabbi D. Levin*

**RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

# Migdal Ohr

"And you shall write upon [the stones] all the words of this Torah when you cross over, so that you shall enter the land Hashem, your G-d, is giving you…" (Devarim 22:7) Moshe commanded the Jews to erect stones in the Jordan River as they crossed into the Land of Israel. They were to be smeared with lime and upon them written the words of the Torah. There is a difference of opinion what exactly was written, whether it was the Torah we read today, or a listing of the commandments, but regardless, the message is the same.

The point was that the Torah, the guiding principles of our lives as given by Hashem, Himself, was to be firmly established as part and parcel of our entry into the Promised Land. However, this verse seems to imply that it was an imperative for them being able to live in the land. While having the stones erected at the time of entry may be dramatic, is it really that crucial? Could they not have done it later or someplace else?

To understand the importance, we must delve into the reason these stones are pivotal to our entry into the land. As the Ibn Ezra explains, it is in the merit of the Torah and Mitzvos that Hashem will fight for you and enable you to conquer your enemies. This was the first Mitzvah they would have as they entered the land and it would start them off right.

Further, the way to remain living in the Land of Israel is to fulfill the mitzvos. If we do not, we will be cast out of it. By establishing our code of conduct right away, it would help cement our dedication to them. When one proclaims his beliefs in a public forum, he is driven to stand by them so as not to lose face. This act would help us stand firm in the face of the other nations of the world.

However, there is other aspect of this mitzvah which is fundamental to our entry to the Promised Land. Previously, Moshe had told the Jews that they were not being given the land because of their righteousness, but the inhabitants were being expelled because of their wickedness. Now, says the Ohr HaChaim, the Jews would do something that would make them worthy of entering the land on their own merit. That is why this mitzvah cam now, and why the end of the posuk which calls Hashem, "G-d of your fathers," finishes by saying, "to you." No longer did we rely solely on the merits of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Now, upon fulfilling this mitzvah, we would establish our own merit.

And what merit would that be? Precisely what we said before. It would be in the merit of listening and following Hashem's Torah, thereby ensuring His beneficent oversight and protection against our enemies, combined with our taking strides to ensure continued compliance and adherence to it by proudly declaring our beliefs.

As we approach Rosh Hashana and prepare to enter a new year, it behooves us to reenact the establishment of our dedication to Hashem and His Torah – and that these beliefs ARE written in stone.

*A contingent of government officials came to Rimanov to find a warehouse for the army's food and supplies. After combing the city, the only place they came up with was the local Shul. When the heads of the Kehila heard, they ran to R' Mendele of Rimanov to ask him what to do.*

*One person stood up and said that as soon as they told the officials that the roof leaks and all their supplies would be ruined, they would change their minds and not use the Shul as a storehouse. Everyone agreed that this seemed a good plan of action.*

*R' Mendele, however, heard this and said they were sorely mistaken. In fact, he said, it was because of the leaky roof that this Gezeira had befallen them. "If we don't actively take care of our own Shul, and degrade its honor by allowing the roof to leak, what do you expect of the non-Jews? Go fix the roof right away and everything will be alright." © 2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr*

**RABBI AVI SHAFRAN**

# Discarding Despondence

The horrors of the tochacha, the parsha's description of what Klal Yisrael will endure should

it drift from heeding the Torah, left our ancestors dejected. As Rashi writes at the beginning of parshas Nitzavim (Devarim 29:9), when they heard the 98 curses in our parshah, in addition to the 48 in parshas Bichukosai, "their faces paled" and they said, "who can possibly persevere through this?"

Significantly, in the yearly Torah reading cycle, these parashos coincide with Elul's march toward the Yimei Hadin. And despondence this time of year is a seasonal affliction.

We, too, can feel dejected as Rosh Hashanah comes close, as we will be judged on things that we repented for last year but may need to do the same once again.

But feeling despondent is counterproductive.

The late comedian Mitch Hedberg would deadpan: "I used to do drugs." And then, after a short pause, add: "I still do. But I used to, too."

The line may have been a throw-away absurdity. But I think he was describing how he had once (perhaps more than once) quit drugs, only to come to re-embrace them. When he was clean, he "used to do drugs"; now, off the wagon, he does them again.

Many of us can relate, having resolved each year to improve in some of the very same ways we had resolved to improve the year before. We "used to" do things that we currently do too.

In a famous letter, Rav Yitzchok Hutner, zt"l, told a despondent student to realize that one can "lose battles but win wars," that what makes life meaningful is not beatific basking in the sublime company of one's accomplishments but rather in one's dynamic struggles.

Shlomo Hamelech's maxim that "Seven times does the righteous one fall and get up" (Mishlei, 24:16), Rav Hutner continues, does not mean that "even after falling seven times, the righteous one manages to gets up again" but, rather, that it is only and through repeated falls that a person achieves. The struggles -- even the failures -- are inherent elements of what can, with determination and perseverance, become an ultimate victory.

Facing our mistakes squarely, and feeling the regret that is the bedrock of repentance, is essential. But it carries a risk: despondence born of battles lost. But the war is not over. We must pick ourselves up. Again. And, if need be, again.

And, as to the curses in the parsha, as Moshe reassured the people (see Rashi, Devarim 29:9), despite all the past and possible future failures, "You are still standing." 

**RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN**

# Reb Yeruchem

"You shall take of the first of every fruit... and go to the place that Hashem your G-d will choose... and you shall say to him [the Kohen], 'I declare today to Hashem your G-d that I have come to the Land that Hashem swore to our forefathers.'" (Devarim 26:2-3)

What you are telling the Kohen, says Rashi, is in essence that you are not an ingrate. You own up to the debt of gratitude that you owe Hashem, The "declaration," says Ramban, is accomplished simply by showing up with the bikurim/first fruits. But if that is so, then why is the accompanying speech even necessary? The very act of bringing the bikurim says all that needs to be said!

The operating principle here is that there are three realms of mitzvos. Some are performed in deed. Others are internal -- performed by the heart and mind. Still others are performed through speech. No realm should be considered as most or least important. They are all equally necessary. Ramban at the end of parshas Bo sees a common theme running through many mitzvos: acknowledging the existence of G-d, and His role as our Creator. He then adds, "Our intention in raising our voices in prayer, and in having our synagogues, and the merit of communal prayer, is that people should have a place where they gather and thank Hashem for creating them... This is what Chazal meant when they said... that tefillah requires audible speech. The obligation of expressing gratitude cannot be satisfied by a person's recognition and appreciation. It must be clearly enunciated.

The mitzvah of hakoras hatov has an active component -- the act of bringing bikurim satisfies that demand. It is insufficient, however, to discharge one's full responsibility. The Torah requires an oral component as well. A person must give voice to his sentiments of gratitude. This cannot be done by some formulaic recitation of unfelt words.

Contemporary practice seems to support this. Common etiquette requires that people be verbose and effusive in conveying their thanks for all favors received. This is a good thing. But every good thing, when not properly executed, loses its essential meaning. Moreover, it can even lead to bad things -- as in this case, where it inspires words of falsehood and flattery.

Some bnei Torah have a hard time verbalizing expressions of thanks. They rationalize that too many people have cheapened the practice by padding their thanks with excessive words and with falsehoods. They tell themselves that they want no part of this custom, and move to the other extreme. It's the thought that counts, they tell themselves; they will not participate in the empty ceremony practiced by others. They truly feel gratitude, and stand fully prepared to reciprocate. Why should it be necessary to share the feeling?

Our parshah is their rebuke. We see here that part of the mitzvah of gratitude is verbalizing it -- in full detail, and with the volume up.

I therefore criticize those bnei Torah who do not express their gratitude to people who have benefitted them. They have no license to free themselves from this responsibility. To the contrary. Whoever says more is praiseworthy. Should their friend do them a favor, they should immediately respond verbally: "I thank you, and I will always remember your kindness." One who is lackadaisical about this obligation ought to greatly fear that because of this, he will fail entirely in his hakoras hatov obligations, including the areas of thought and action. (Based on Daas Torah by Rav Yeruchem Levovitz zt"l, Devarim vol. 2, pgs. 32-34.) 

**RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

# Lelamed Weekly Dvar

The Jews are instructed that on the day they cross the Jordan river and enter their new land, they are to gather large stones, plaster them, and engrave upon them the entire Torah. These instructions are given twice in short succession, with slightly different wording (27:2 and 27:4-8), but why?

Rav S. R. Hirsch posits that the first instructions include the words "and it will be, on the day that you cross the Jordan..." because they were instructed to begin preparing the stones before they even cross the Jordan. It is only by virtue of the preparation that they merited to cross the Jordan in the first place. This instruction speaks to the power of mindset, intentional preparation, and concrete action in helping us achieve actual change.

As we near the Yamim Noraim (high holidays), this lesson is especially relevant for us; as we seek to improve our lives, the first step needs to be a change in our approach, ensuring that we give proper thought to our actions. 

**SHLOMO KATZ**

# Hama'ayan

"You have distinguished Hashem today to be Elokim for you, and to walk in His ways, and to observe His decrees, His commandments, and His statutes, and to listen to His voice. And, Hashem has distinguished you today to be for Him a treasured people, as He spoke to you, and to observe all His commandments." (26:17-18) R' Alexander Ziskind of Horodna z"l (1739-1794; Belarus) comments: Do not think that the Mitzvot are a burden, like a decree that a master imposes on his servants. To the contrary, because of Hashem's immense love for us, He has given us a great, priceless gift. (Yesod V'shoresh Ha'avodah: Introduction)

"You will go mad from the sight of your eyes that you will see." (28:34) R' Yosef Yozel Horowitz z"l (1847-1919; the Alter of Novardok) writes: The "sight of your eyes" that will drive a person mad -- i.e., confuse a person -- refers to seeing one's own good qualities. He explains: The Gemara (Bava Batra 78b) teaches that the key to controlling one's Yetzer Ha'ra is performing a Cheshbon Ha'nefesh / self-assessment (literally, "accounting of the soul"). Everyone performs assessments and accountings, the Alter notes: They balance their checkbooks and decide what purchases they can afford or not afford; they take their temperatures and decide whether they need medicine; etc. Yet, most people find it difficult to perform a Cheshbon Ha'nefesh / an accounting of their behavior and thoughts. Why?

He answers: It is easy to recognize a Rasha / wicked person. Most people have no trouble avoiding people or behaviors that are undeniably wicked. However, if the wicked person wears the garb, has the mannerisms, and speaks the language of a Talmid Chacham / Torah scholar, the danger he presents is enormous. Such a person is difficult to recognize for what he really is.

Similarly, if an otherwise observant Jew has a regular yearning for one particular non-kosher dish, he will have no trouble recognizing that as a failing. Even if he cannot control it, he will make sure that it does not affect other areas of his observance. Generally, however, people are not accustomed to looking at their good qualities and bad qualities separately. Instead, they weave their good qualities and bad qualities into one "picture" of themselves. They combine black and white to create gray, rather than addressing the black and the white separately. Worse yet, they alter their view of what is good to accommodate their failings. In this sense, being aware of their own good qualities has driven them "mad."

Some bad qualities may seem very insignificant, the Alter notes. However, if one takes a valid one dollar bill and adds a zero -- i.e., nothing -- to the denomination, the result is equivalent to a counterfeit ten dollar bill. So, too, even minor bad qualities that are woven into a good lifestyle can create a corrupt lifestyle. What is the source of this mistake? It is that most people see righteousness and wickedness as absolutes, not appreciating that there are an infinite number of levels between a Tzaddik and a Rasha. Thus, one who sees himself as essentially righteous thinks he has nothing to worry about. But he is wrong, writes the Alter. A person is always on a slope, either going up or going down. Every bad quality takes a person at least one step down the slope, farther from being a Tzaddik and closer to being a Rasha. That is why no bad quality should be ignored. (Madregat Ha'adam p.136)