

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In this week's parsha, all of Jewish history is reflected in the two relatively short scenarios that the Torah describes for us. The opening section describes the promise that the Jewish people will come into the Land of Israel, settle there and develop the country, build the Temple and express their gratitude to God for the blessings that He has bestowed upon them. They will harvest bountiful crops and commemorate these achievements by bringing the first fruits of their labor as a thanksgiving offering to the Temple and the priests of the time.

They will then recite a short statement of Jewish history, a synopsis of the events that have occurred to them from the time of the patriarchs until their own time. The Torah promises blessings and serenity to the people of Israel. The Torah does not minimize the toil and travail that led to the moment of these offerings in the Temple. However, it does convey a sense of satisfaction and achievement, of gratitude and appreciation, for the accomplishments of the Jewish people, individually and nationally, regarding the Land of Israel and its bounty.

It is a spirit of wondrous gratitude that marks the accomplishments of the individual farmer and of the people generally in settling and developing the Land of Israel. There is little room for hubris and self-aggrandizement in the set text of this offering in the Temple. Rather, the text highlights the relationship between God, the Land and the people of Israel. That is the first scenario that is outlined for us in this week's parsha. The second scenario in the parsha is a much more somber and even frightening one. It describes the events, travail and persecution that will visit the Jewish people over the long millennia of its exile from its land. In vivid detail, the Torah describes the horrors, defeats and destruction that the Exile will visit upon the Jewish people. In our generation, this portion of the Torah reading can actually be seen on film and in museums.

We are witness to the fact that not one word of the Torah's description of dark future events was an exaggeration or hyperbole. This period of trouble and exile lasted far longer than the initial scenario of the offering of the first fruit in the Temple. And, unfortunately, the residue of this second scenario is still with us and within us as we live in a very anti-Jewish world society.

Yet we are to be heartened by the concluding

words of this section of the Torah that promises us that it will be the first scenario of this week's parsha that will eventually prevail. Even though so much of the negative is still present in our current state of affairs, we should be grateful for our restoration to sovereignty and dominion in our own homeland and for the bounty of the land that we currently enjoy. All of this is a symbol of the beginning of the resurrection of the first scenario and the diminishing of the effects of the second scenario. May we all be wise enough to realize this and adjust our attitudes and actions accordingly. ©2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Here's an experiment. Walk around the great monuments of Washington D.C. There, at the far end, is the figure of Abraham Lincoln, four times life-size. Around him on the walls of the memorial are the texts of two of the greatest speeches of history, the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's second Inaugural: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right..."

A little way away is the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial with its quotations from each period of the President's life as leader, most famously: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Keep walking along the Potomac and you come to the Jefferson Memorial, modelled on the Pantheon at Rome. There too you will find, around the dome and on the interior walls, quotations from the great man, most famously from the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident..."

Now visit London. You will find many memorials and statues of great people. But you will find no quotations. The base of the statue will tell you who it represents, when they lived, and the position they occupied or the work they did, but no narrative, no quotation, no memorable phrases or defining words.

Take the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square. Churchill was one of the greatest orators of all time. His wartime speeches and broadcasts are part of British history. But no words of his are inscribed on the monument, and the same applies to

almost everyone else publicly memorialised.

It's a striking difference. One society -- the United States of America -- tells a story on its monuments, a story woven out of the speeches of its greatest leaders. The other, England, does not. It builds memorials but it doesn't tell a story. This is one of the deep differences between a covenant society and a tradition-based society.

In a tradition-based society like England, things are as they are because that is how they were. England, writes Roger Scruton, "was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don't need an explanation. They are there because they are there."

Covenant societies are different. They don't worship tradition for tradition's sake. They do not value the past because it's old. They remember the past because it was events in the past that led to the collective determination that moved people to create the society in the first place. The Pilgrim Fathers of America were fleeing religious persecution in search of religious freedom. Their society was born in an act of moral commitment, handed on to successive generations.

Covenant societies exist not because they have been there a long time, nor because of some act of conquest, nor for the sake of some economic or military advantage. They exist to honour a pledge, a moral bond, an ethical undertaking. That is why telling the story is essential to a covenant society. It reminds all citizens of why they are there.

The classic example of telling the story occurs in this week's parsha, in the context of bringing first-fruits to Jerusalem: "The Priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous... So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me.'" (Deut. 26:4-10)

We all know the passage. Instead of saying it on Shavuot when bringing first-fruits, we now say it on Pesach as the central part of the Haggadah. What remains remarkable is that, even in biblical times, every member of the nation was expected to know the story of the nation, and recite it annually, and make it part of his or her personal memory and identity -- "My father... so the Lord brought us out."

A covenant is more than a myth of origin -- like the Roman story of Romulus and Remus, or the English story of King Arthur and his knights. Unlike a myth, which merely claims to say what happened, a covenant always contains a specific set of undertakings that bind its

citizens in the present and into the future.

Here for example is Lyndon Baines Johnson talking about the American covenant: "They came here -- the exile and the stranger... They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish."

Covenant societies -- of which the USA is the supreme contemporary example -- are moral societies, meaning not that their members are more righteous than others but that they see themselves as publicly accountable to certain moral standards that are part of the text and texture of their national identity. They are honouring the obligations imposed upon them by the founders.

Indeed, as the Johnson quotation makes clear, covenant societies see their very fate as tied up with the way they meet or fail to meet those obligations. "If we keep its terms, we shall flourish" -- implying that if we don't, we won't. This is a way of thinking the West owes entirely to the book of Devarim, most famously in the second paragraph of the Shema: "If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today... then I will send rain on your land in its season... I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.

"Be careful, lest you are enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you." (Deut. 11:13-17)

Covenant societies are not ethnic nations bound by common racial origin. They make room for outsiders -- immigrants, asylum seekers, resident aliens -- who become part of the society by taking its story and making it their own, as Ruth did in the biblical book that bears her name ("Your people will be my people, and your God, my God") or as successive waves of immigrants did when they came to the United States. Indeed conversion in Judaism is best understood not on the model of conversion to another religion -- such as Christianity or Islam -- but as the acquisition of citizenship in a nation like the USA.

It is utterly astonishing that the mere act of telling the story, regularly, as a religious duty, sustained Jewish identity across the centuries, even in the absence of all the normal accompaniments of nationhood -- land, geographical proximity, independence, self-determination -- and never allowed the people to forget its ideals, its aspirations, its collective project of building a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, a place of freedom and justice and human dignity, in which no human being is sovereign; in which God alone is King.

One of the most profound truths about the politics of covenant -- the message of the first-fruits' declaration in this week's parsha -- is: If you want to

sustain freedom, never stop telling the story. *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

“**W**hen 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.

However, the drama of the first fruits seems to be emphasizing a far different truth than that of God, the Ultimate Benefactor. The speech-song which accompanies the first fruits – an element which is unique to this particular commandment, and is not even a factor in the giving of tithes but which is a necessary condition with regard to the first fruits – makes no reference to the Lord of the rains and the winds and the sun and the nutrient-filled soil which produced these luscious fruits and sustaining grains of the seven species. The clear emphasis 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.

This quintessential early history of Israel goes one step further. It is recited by the individual in the first person: “My father was a wandering Aramean.... The Egyptians... afflicted us.... And He [God] gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 26:4–11).

The text makes the individual feel that the Land of Israel is his personal land. It is chiefly because of the brevity and total individual identification with Israel’s historical past that these verses are co-opted by the author of the Haggada for the Passover Seder. And if the drama of the Passover meal is tailor-made to express the truth that “in every generation, it is incumbent upon every individual to see himself as if he came out of Egypt,” so is the drama of the first fruits tailor-made to express a parallel truth that “in every generation it is incumbent upon every individual to see himself as if he

arrived in Israel.” Indeed, just as the Passover Seder is “speech plus food,” so is the Bikkurim “speech plus fruits”; and just as the Passover Haggada comes from the verse “And you shall tell your child, (vehigadeta),” so does the speech-song of the first fruits open with the words, “I told (higadeti) this day to the Lord your God that I came to the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give to us” (26:3).

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 is totally unlike the tithes, for example, which must be given by biblical command only from wine, grain, and oil (universal staples), and by rabbinical command on all fruits and vegetables; the first fruits are not so much about God’s agricultural bounty as they are about God’s gift of the Land of Israel to the nation of Israel. Indeed, 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 Elchanan Samet (in his masterful biblical commentary) cites a comment by Rabbi Menachem Ziemba (Chiddushim, 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.

Rabbi Elchanan Samet goes still one step further. The Mishna teaches that the first fruits are to be brought from Shavuot until Sukkot, each area in Israel in

accordance with the ripening of their respective seven species (Bikkurim 1:10). (Shavuot marks the first ripening of wheat-bread, and so it concludes Passover, when the barley ripened. Bread, the staff of life, is the basic “first fruit.” Throughout the summer the individual farmers and householders would come with the other special and indigenous fruits.) And we are only commanded to do so when there is a Holy Temple, requiring from us additional offerings as well as song and overnight sleep in Jerusalem (Mishna, Bikkurim 2:4).

Each one of the Pilgrim Festivals does have an aspect of its celebrations that touches on the remembrance of our entry into the Land of Israel: Passover, with its fifth expression of redemption (Ex. 6:8) and its fifth cup, Sukkot with its mention of the four species (Lev. 23:39), and Shavuot, which is actually called the Festival of the First Fruits because of the newly ripened wheat and offering of two challa loaves. But it is the bringing of the other first fruits all summer and its concomitant speech-song which exclusively resonates with this experience. Wheat is a universal grain, whereas the other first fruits are unique to the Land of Israel and so emphasize the truest reason for the sanctity of this land: its provision of nutrition and sustenance specifically for the children of Israel (see Deuteronomy, Ekev, commentary 6).

In effect, therefore, the first fruits are a fourth Pilgrim Festival, the Pilgrim Festival which celebrates our entry into the Land of Israel. It was just this accomplishment which was lacking in Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot – and what better way to celebrate the entry into the land than by bringing its unique fruits and reliving our entry after the Exodus! ©2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

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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*”). ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

According to the Torah, tithes are taken from the crops in two three-year cycles. In each of these two cycles, one-tenth of the produce was given to the Levi who serves in the Temple as *ma'aser rishon* (first tithe). An additional tenth is consumed in Jerusalem during the first, second, fourth, and fifth years, as *ma'aser sheni* (second tithe). In the third and sixth years, the second tenth is set aside as *ma'aser ani* (tithe for the poor). After two of these cycles are completed, the Sabbatical year (the seventh year) occurs, during which no tithe is taken at all.

The law of *vidui ma'asrot* (confession of the tithes) states that on the last day of Passover, in the fourth and seventh years, the owner of the crops comes forward to declare that, during the previous years, he has been faithful to his tithe obligation. In the words of the Torah, “Then you shall say before the Lord your God, ‘I have removed the holy things from the house [*ma'aser sheni*] and I also have given it to the Levite [*ma'aser rishon*], to the proselyte, to the orphan and to the widow [*ma'aser ani*], according to whatever commandment you have commanded me” (Deuteronomy 26:13).

One wonders, why is the celebration referred to as a *vidui* (confession), when we joyously share that we've properly given charity? What does confession have to do with this practice?

Sforno argues that the confession is not directly linked to the tithe process but rather to the sin of the golden calf. Had that event not occurred, the firstborn rather than the priest or Levite would have undertaken the mission to perform divine service. It follows that only when the firstborns were disqualified for participating in making the golden calf did the need arise to give to the priest or Levite.

Another thought comes to mind. It is, of course, possible that upon reciting the formula, one may recall forgetting to give *ma'aser* properly. If so, *vidui ma'asrot* gives one the opportunity to amend one's mistakes and complete the obligation (Rashi, Deuteronomy 26:13).

Rabbi Kook introduced a further novel idea. Perhaps the term confession is used to teach that confession can be used to proclaim one's good deeds as well as one's flaws and errors. And so, the Israelites humbly but joyously share that they got it right.

It is in this spirit that one can consider an added vidui on Yom Kippur. While our vidui listed in Hebrew alphabetical order focuses on our misdeeds – *ashamnu* (we have sinned), *bagadnu* (we have acted treacherously), *gazalnu* (we have robbed), *dibarnu dofi* (we have spoken slander) – why not also single out our accomplishments in Hebrew alphabetical order:

Ahavnu, *Beirachnu*, *Gadalnu*, *Dibarnu Yofi* We have loved, we have blessed, we have grown, we have spoken positively.

He'elinu, *Vechasnu*, *Zeiraznu* We have raised up, we have shown compassion, we have acted enthusiastically,

Chamalnu, *Tipachnu Emet* We have been empathetic, we have cultivated truth,

Ya'atznu tov, *Kibadnu*, *Lamadnu*, *Machalnu* We have given good advice, we have respected, we have learned, we have forgiven,

Nichamnu, *Salalnu*, *Orarnu* We have comforted, we have been creative, we have stirred,

Pa'alnu, *Tzadaknu*, *Kivinu la'aretz* We have been spiritual activists, we have been just, we have longed for Israel,

Richamnu, *Shakadnu* We have been merciful, we have given full effort,

Tamachnu, *Taramnu*, *Tikanu* We have supported, we have contributed, we have repaired.

Vidui is a multilayered term. It allows us to self-evaluate, always pushing ourselves to do better. But it also allows us to step back, feel good about ourselves, and declare, We have faithfully followed God's wishes and commands. May we be blessed to continue doing so forever. © 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

"Cursed be the man who makes a graven or molten image, an abomination of Hashem... and places it in hiding..." (Devarim 27:15) The Torah tells us of the blessings and curses that the Jewish People testified to. It was an awesome sight, to be sure. Half the populace stood on one mountain, and the other half stood on a different, nearby mountain. The Levi'im and Kohanim stood in between. They called out, "Blessed be he who does not make a graven or molten image..." and everyone on the mountains cried, "Amen!" Then they repeated it as a curse, as is written above and in the Torah, and again, the whole nation cried, "Amen."

If they began with the blessing, why doesn't the

Torah mention it? Why just mention the curse? The Sforno points this out and says that the sins recounted here were actually committed, at a certain point in time, primarily by the corrupt Jewish leaders in power. The intent of this curse was to place the responsibility for their actions firmly on their own shoulders. Though we normally have a concept of *arvus*, responsibility for each other, since it was the leaders who sinned, the people then were unable to protest.

Further, the commentaries point out that these sins were between Man and Hashem. Though they truly affected others, they did these things secretly, such as hiding the idol or moving the boundary marker at night. Only Hashem knew what they had done, and they have no one to blame but themselves.

This may be another reason the Torah highlights the curse. The blessing seems unwarranted. "Blessed be the person who doesn't demean his parents!" Well, sure. What kind of lowlife is ungrateful and would think ill of his parents? "Blessed be the person who doesn't mislead the blind person." Really? You'd have to be pretty rotten to do that. But if they actually do it? You know how bad it is, and how deserving of a curse the person is.

The Torah wants us to realize how far a person might fall, and in contrast, if he maintains his holiness and DOESN'T fall, that he is surely deserving of a *bracha*. At this point, we can go back and appreciate the blessing that was given and agreed to by the entire population.

There is one declaration, however, which doesn't follow this pattern. There are a number of blessings/curses about inappropriate relationships, and then comes the final one: "Cursed is the person who will not fulfill the words of this Torah to do them." There, we might understand that one who actually keeps the whole Torah is deserving of a blessing. What an achievement! But we'd be making a mistake.

Keeping the Torah is not only for the holiest of people. It's for all Jews. If one misses that, and thinks it's just admirable, then he will not be bothered if he, himself, doesn't uphold parts of the Torah. Therefore, the Torah speaks it out as a curse, to let us know that not following everything means we have let our guards down and our standards fall. This is something we cannot take lightly. We have high standards because we are meant to live up to them.

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l was once walking with a bochur on Shabbos and a car drove past them. The boy screamed at the driver, "Shabbos! Shabbos!"

R' Shlomo Zalman looked at him and asked, "What are you doing? He can't hear you; his windows are closed. And if he did hear you, do you think he'll suddenly stop the car, get out and say, "Oh no! I didn't realize it was a problem?" The boy cast his gaze downward.

R' Shlomo Zalman continued gently, "You SHOULD scream "Shabbos! Shabbos!" - but inwardly, to yourself, to remind you that it's a desecration of the Kedushas Shabbos and it's not OK. But to him? That's not for you to do." © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Twelve Large Stones

The Torah is primarily a set of Divine Laws, together with detailed explanations, given to Moshe on Har Sinai during the forty days and nights that Moshe remained on the mountain. Just before the B'nei Yisrael were to enter the land that Hashem promised them as an ancestral inheritance, Moshe instructed the people about establishing an altar and a monument of twelve stones on which were to be inscribed the words of the Torah. In our parasha, we find the commandment to establish this monument.

The Torah states: "Moshe and the elders of Yisrael commanded the people, saying, 'Keep the entire commandment that I command you this day. It shall be on the day that you cross the Jordan to the land that Hashem, your Elokim, gives you, you shall set up great stones for yourself and you shall coat them with plaster. You shall inscribe on them all the words of this Torah, when you cross over, so that you may enter the land that Hashem, your Elokim, gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as Hashem, the Elokim of your forefathers, spoke about you. It shall be that when you cross the Jordan, you shall erect these stones, of which I command you today, on Har Eival, and you shall coat them with plaster. There you shall build an altar for Hashem, your Elokim, an altar of stones; you shall not raise iron upon them. Of whole stones shall you build the altar of Hashem, your Elokim, and you shall bring upon it olah offerings to Hashem, your Elokim. You shall slaughter peace-offerings and eat there, and you shall rejoice before Hashem, your Elokim. You shall inscribe on the stones all the words of this Torah, well clarified.'"

There is a discussion among the Rabbis about the beginning of this section, namely, "Moshe and the elders of Yisrael commanded the people." Ibn Ezra explains that Moshe only commanded the people at the command of Hashem. Moshe would not have decided to command the people by himself. The Ramban explains that when Moshe had completed restating the laws that Hashem had commanded to a new generation of the B'nei Yisrael, the majority of which had not experienced the Revelation at Har Sinai, Moshe then commanded the elders to reiterate those commandments directly to the people. The elders would be the assurance of the observance of the commandments after Moshe's death. Moshe knew that he would not enter the land, so the elders would have to become the guides for the new generation. HaAmeK Davar explains that this command was actually a new Covenant between Hashem and the new generation of

the B'nei Yisrael prior to their entering the Holy Land. Moshe also established at this time the order of the new covenant that would be recited while the various tribes stood either on Har Gerizim or Har Eival, according to the grouping established here. First, the laws would be written on the stones, and afterwards, the blessings and the curses that would befall the B'nei Yisrael when they observed these laws or when they abandoned them, were recited by the Leviim who stood in the valley between these two mountains. After each blessing or curse, the B'nei Yisrael on both mountains would answer, "Amen, I believe." This was their acceptance of the covenant.

The specific commandment to erect a monument of twelve stones with the words of the Torah written "b'eir heiteiv, well clarified," leaves itself open to several interpretations. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the literal meaning of b'eir heiteiv could be related to Habakuk, (2,2), "write the vision down and make it clear on your tablets that he who runs may read it." This is similar to the opinion of ibn Ezra who says that the writing had to be clear and legible to all. HaRav Hirsch explains that this interpretation is contradicted in Gemara Sotah, which states that the words were to be written down in the seventy known languages of the world at that time.

The different approaches raised by these two explanations of b'eir heiteiv are based on other parts of this paragraph. The Torah states, "Keep the entire commandment that I command you this day." Some of the commentators explain that this is referring to the mitzvah, commandment (in the singular), of writing the words of the Torah on the twelve stones. Others argue that the word "commandment" is not truly singular as it represents the entire body of commandments given to Moshe in the desert. This would include the six hundred and thirteen commandments of the Torah, not just a single command. These words were to be written clearly on the stones so that all of the B'nei Yisrael would have a constant reminder of their responsibilities toward Hashem and their fellowman. The observance of each of these commandments was a necessary guarantor of their possession of the land. This was the Covenant with the new generation of the B'nei Yisrael, a promise of the land for the observance of Hashem's commandments.

The commentators who explain b'eir heiteiv as the words translated into the seventy languages of the world, give two different explanations for this translation, one based on writing down the entire Torah and the other reflecting writing down only the laws of the Torah. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why the Midrash says that these words were translated into the seventy known languages. He explains that each nation was given the opportunity to accept the Torah before it was offered to the Jewish nation. Each nation asked Hashem what laws were found in the Torah, and He explained that it says, "Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not kill, and thou

shalt not commit adultery.” Each nation then refused, saying that these actions were inherited from their fathers and was their inheritance for the future. Only the B’nei Yisrael accepted the Torah without question, since it was the commandments of Hashem. HaRav Sorotzkin then asks why the B’nei Yisrael should write the words in the languages of those nations that had already rejected the Torah once. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the entire Torah was written so that the nations would know (as Rashi explained in his first comment on the Torah) that Hashem created the world and could give any portion of it to whichever nation He wished to settle there. He also explains that each commandment was translated so that nations that had previously rejected the Torah as unfeasible, might rethink their rejection when they see that the B’nei Yisrael was capable of observing the whole Torah. They could either convert or become a ger toshav, a non-Jew who would live with the B’nei Yisrael and observe the commandments.

We are fortunate to return to our land and observe Hashem’s commandments there. May we continue to grow in our observance and make this land a Holy Land and ourselves worthy of inheriting it. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

The location of Har Gerizim and Har Eival would seem to be rather straightforward – and not just because there are mountains with those names in Israel (especially since biblical place names are often applied imprecisely). The Torah says explicitly (Devarim 11:30) they are “next to Eilonei Moreh,” which is associated with Shechem (Bereishis 12:6), so Har Gerizim and Har Eival would be the two mountains on either side of Shechem.

When Yosam addressed the inhabitants of Shechem (Shoftim 9:7), he stood on Har Gerizim and called out to them (in a raised voice). Yoel Elitzur (Places in the Parasha, Ki Tavo) discusses the acoustical qualities of this location, including someone standing on Har Gerizim being able to hear a conversation taking place on Har Eival, making it an ideal location for the blessings and curses to be proclaimed. Although there is no truth to the rumor that Har Gerizim – the location from where the blessings were proclaimed – is lush with vegetation, while Har Eival – from where the curses were uttered – is barren (they are said to have about the same level of vegetation), there should still be little doubt that the mountains to the immediate north and south of the valley within which the modern-day city of Nablus is located are Har Gerizim and Har Eival.

Nevertheless, the Yerushalmi (Sotah 7:3), which largely parallels the discussion in the Bavli (Sotah 33b), quotes R’ Elazar’s opinion that Yehoshua built two mounds of dirt near the Jordan River, calling one Har Gerizim and the other Har Eival. There are basically two

reasons why this scenario is suggested: (1) The implication (Devarim 27:2-8/12) that the commandments associated with Har Gerizim and Har Eival were supposed to be fulfilled immediately after crossing the Jordan River, since Shechem is too far from where they crossed to accomplish this right away; and (2) these mountains are said to be “opposite Gilgal” (11:30), and since Gilgal is just east of Yericho (Yehoshua 4:19), with Shechem being not just farther west, but much farther north, it’s nowhere near Gilgal.

[I translated the words “מול הגלגל” as “opposite Gilgal,” despite the strong arguments made by Elitzur (in his essay on Parashat Tzav) that “מול” really means “on the same side as” or “at the foot of.” I translated it this way not just because it’s how the commentators translate it, but because I think there’s a difference between “מול” and “ממול” (e.g. Vayikra 5:8) or “אל מול” (e.g. Vayikra 8:9), with “מול” meaning “opposite” and the other two referring to the perspective of someone facing what’s under discussion, i.e. towards someone or something on the opposite side (see Rashi on Vayikra 5:8, based on Chulin 19b and Toras Kohanim). When half of the Tribes stood “אל מול הר גרזים” and half of them stood “אל מול הר עיבל” (Yehoshua 8:33), they were facing each other, not just opposite each other. Either way “מול הגלגל” indicates being near Gilgal, which Har Gerizim and Har Eival are not.]

There are several reasons why Har Gerizim and Har Eival being far from where the nation crossed the Jordan doesn’t preclude these being the mountains referred to. First of all, R’ Shimon (Sotah 36a) says they miraculously traveled the 60 mil to Har Gerizim and Har Eival that same day. Secondly, the only commandment specified to be done on the day they crossed was setting up large stones, plastering them, and writing “these words of the Torah” on them (Devarim 27:2). The rest of the commandments could be done afterwards (as indicated by the reintroduction – in 27:4 – of “when you cross the Jordan”). And the 12 large stones taken from the Jordan were set up right away – in Gilgal (Yehoshua 4:20). A straightforward reading of the narrative has the nation crossing the Jordan, conquering Yericho, traveling [west and a bit north] to conquer Ai, then going [farther north] to Har Gerizim and Har Eival. In Sanhedrin (44a), R’ Sheila and Rav only argue whether Yehoshua did the right thing by traveling 60 mil to fulfill the commandments at Har Gerizim and Har Eival; both agree that this was where it was done, with Rav saying (based on Yehoshua 11:15) this was exactly what G-d had commanded Moshe. I would add that G-d told Yehoshua (6:2-5) to conquer Yericho; if he was supposed to go to Har Gerizim and Har Eival first, wouldn’t G-d have told him to do that instead?

As far as Har Gerizim and Har Eival not being near Gilgal, some suggest there was more than one Gilgal, but the Torah referring to it as “the Gilgal” would seem to preclude this possibility. Besides, the rest of that

verse is also problematic (and not just because Eilonei Moreh isn't near Gilgal either). The Talmud (Sotah 33b) does parse the verse, with R' Eliezer ben Yaakov explaining that most of the verse is not telling us where Har Gerizim and Har Eival are, but how to get there – which includes starting near Gilgal. If G-d wanted them to go to Har Gerizim and Har Eival right away, wouldn't it have been better to cross the Jordan farther north, parallel to Shechem? That wouldn't have been an easy trip, so they were told to cross the Jordan from where they were (Arvos Moav) into Arvos Yericho "on the western side of the Jordan, [getting to Har Gerizim and Har Eival by traversing] the land of the Canaanim who live in the plain (referring to the Jordan Rift Valley, see Bamidbar 13:29) – the plain that is opposite Gilgal." The verse then returns to describing where Har Gerizim and Har Eival are – "next to Eilonei Moreh."

Once we've established that the mountains currently identified as Har Gerizim and Har Eival are the same mountains the Torah refers to by those names, we should verify which one is which. I am unaware of anyone who doubts that Har Gerizim is the mountain south of Shechem, with Har Eival to its north, but how do we know? For one thing, Har Gerizim is sacred to the Samaritans; they still bring the Passover offering there every year. They've been around since the First Temple, so the association of Har Gerizim with the southern mountain goes back at least that far. There's no reason to assume they switched the names – even though they did switch the names in their version of the Torah, with the commandments done (according to them) on Har Gerizim.

There's an interesting nuance in how the associated commandments were performed. Rather than always being described as being done "on" each mountain (as they are in Devarim 11:29), the stones are supposed to be set up "in" Har Eival (Devarim 27:4). And while the first set of Tribes are to stand "on" Har Gerizim (27:12), the second set stood "in" Har Eival (27:13). This is mirrored in Yehoshua (8:30), where the altar was built "in" Har Eival. The topography of the mountains bears this out, with significant indentations in the slopes of Har Eival creating the impression of something in an indentation being "in" the mountain, not just "on" it.

In the 1980s, archeologist Adam Zertal discovered a 12th century structure "in" Mount Ebal (Har Eival) made from unhewn stones, in the shape of an altar, which contained the charred remains of thousands of bones – all from kosher animals. His suggestion – that this was "Joshua's altar" – created much controversy. In his essay on Parashat Yitro (where he discusses "altars in archeological findings"), Elitzur writes that "the very identification of the structure as an altar, and in particular its connection to the Book of Joshua, stirred up great debate that transcended the professional field of archeology." [I'm not sure whether his not mentioning this structure in his essay on Mount Gerizim and Mount

Ebal speaks volumes about Elitzur's opinion of Zertal's suggestion, or about his reluctance to insert himself into the controversy.] Much has been written about the arguments for and against Zertal's suggestion and the controversy that surrounded it, but my guess is that although it is a cultic site, it was built well after the ceremony at Har Gerizim and Har Eival that fulfilled the Torah's commandments. Nevertheless, the site for this "bamah" was likely chosen precisely because it was where Yehoshua built the altar G-d had commanded, indicating that of the two mountains, this one is Har Eival.

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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. © 2022 Rabbi S. Ressler and Lelamed, Inc.

