

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Listen to these stories. Behind them lies an extraordinary insight into the nature of Jewish ethics: Story 1. Rabbi Abba used to bind money in his scarf, sling it on his back, and place it at the disposal of the poor. [Ketubot 67b]

Story 2. Mar Ukba had a poor man in his neighbourhood into whose door socket he used to throw four coins every day. Once the poor man thought, "I will go and see who does me this kindness." That day Mar Ukba stayed late at the house of study and his wife was coming home with him. As soon as the poor man saw them moving the door [to leave the coins] he ran out after them, but they fled from him and hid. Why did they do this? Because it was taught: One should throw himself into a fiery furnace rather than publicly put his neighbour to shame. [Ketubot 67b]

Story 3. When Rabbi Jonah saw a man of good family who had lost his money and was ashamed to accept charity, he would go and say to him, "I have heard that an inheritance has come your way in a city across the sea. So here is an article of some value. Sell it and use the proceeds. When you are more affluent, you will repay me." As soon as the man took it, Rabbi Jonah would say, "It's yours is a gift." [Vayikra Rabbah 34:1]

These stories all have to do with the mitzvah of tzedakah whose source is in this week's parsha: If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need . . . Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land. [Deut. 15: 7-8, 10-11]

What we have here is a unique and still remarkable programme for the elimination of poverty.

Mazel tov to
Galia Strupinsky & Noam Klugerman
on their
upcoming wedding!



The first extraordinary fact about the laws of tzedakah as articulated in the Oral tradition is the concept itself. Tzedakah does not mean "charity". We see this immediately in the form of a law inconceivable in any other moral system: "Someone who does not wish to give tzedakah or to give less than is appropriate may be compelled to do so by a Jewish court of law" (Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:10). Charity is always voluntary. Tzedakah is compulsory. Therefore tzedakah does not mean charity. The nearest English equivalent is social justice.

The second is the principle evident in the three stories above. Poverty in Judaism is conceived not merely in material terms: the poor lack the means of sustenance. It is also conceived in psychological terms. Poverty humiliates. It robs people of dignity. It makes them dependent on others - thus depriving them of independence which the Torah sees as essential to self-respect.

This deep psychological insight is eloquently expressed in the third paragraph of the Grace after Meals: Please, O Lord our God, do not make us dependent on the gifts or loans of other people, but only on Your full, open, holy and generous hand so that we may suffer neither shame nor humiliation for ever and all time.

As a result, Jewish law focuses not only on how much we must give but also on the manner in which we do so. Ideally the donor should not know to whom he or she is giving (story 1), nor the recipient know from whom he or she is receiving (story 2). The third story exemplifies another principle: "If a poor person does not want to accept tzedakah, we should practice a form of [benign] deception and give it to him under the guise of a loan" (Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7: 9).

Maimonides sums up the general principle thus: "Whoever gives charity to the poor with bad grace and averted eyes has lost all the merit of his action even though he gives him a thousand gold pieces. He should give with good grace and with joy and should sympathise with them in his plight, as it is said, 'Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor?' [Job 30:25]" (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10: 4).

This is the logic behind two laws that are otherwise inexplicable. The first is "Even a poor person who is dependent on tzedakah is obliged to give tzedakah" (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7: 5). The law seems absurd. Why should we give money to the poor

so that they may give to the poor? It makes sense only on this assumption, that giving is essential to human dignity and tzedakah is the obligation to ensure that everyone has that dignity.

The second is the famous ruling of Maimonides that "The highest degree of charity, exceeded by none, is when a person assists a poor Jew by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment - in a word by putting him in a situation where he can dispense with other people's aid" ((Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10: 7).

Giving someone a job or making him your partner would not normally be considered charity at all. It costs you nothing. But this further serves to show that tzedakah does not mean charity. It means giving people the means to live a dignified life, and any form of employment is more dignified, within the Jewish value system, than dependence.

We have in this ruling of Maimonides in the 12th century the principle that Muhammad Yunus rediscovered in our time, and for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize: the idea of micro-loans enabling poor people to start small businesses. It is a very powerful idea.

In contradistinction to many other religious systems, Judaism refused to romanticise poverty or anaesthetise its pain. Faith is not what Karl Marx called "the opium of the people." The rabbis refused to see poverty as a blessed state, an affliction to be born with acceptance and grace. Instead, the rabbis called it "a kind of death" and "worse than fifty plagues". They said, "Nothing is harder to bear than poverty, because he who is crushed by poverty is like one to whom all the troubles of the world cling and upon whom all the curses of Deuteronomy have descended. If all other troubles were placed one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all."

Maimonides went to the heart of the matter when he said (The Guide for the Perplexed 3:27) "The well-being of the soul can only be obtained after that of the body has been secured." Poverty is not a noble state. You cannot reach spiritual heights if you have no food to eat or roof for your head, if you lack access to medical attention or are beset by financial worries.

I know of no saner approach to poverty, welfare and social justice than that of Judaism. Unsurpassed in its time, it remains the benchmark of a decent society to this day. *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

“**B**ehold [see], I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing, when you

internalize [heed] the commandments of the Lord your God.... And the curse, if you do not internalize [heed] the commandments of the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 11:26–28) Two problems face us as we read these verses, one textual and the other existential. The textual issue is based on the lack of parallelism: "the blessing, when (asher) you internalize, the curse if (im) you do not internalize." We would expect to find parallel consistency, either "when...when" or "if you do...if you do not" in both instances.

The existential issue hits us hard, especially in Israel during these fateful but difficult times. Our cemeteries are filled with children who have been buried by their parents, either soldiers in the line of battle or innocent victims at home, at school, at a bus stop, who were targeted by inhumane suicide bombers. Many if not most of these were our best, our brightest, and our most deserving of reward in accordance with the opening verses of our Torah portion. How then can we possibly explain the many instances of suffering and pain on the part of so many virtuous souls who certainly internalized the commandments of God?

I believe that the precise biblical language reveals a profound truth about Torah commandments and human affairs. After all, the Torah iterates and reiterates that the Almighty gave us His laws "for your good"; proper ethical conduct ensures a well-ordered social structure devoid of aggression and violence. The Sabbaths, festivals, and laws of ritual purity provide for a stable and inter-generational familial nucleus, united by meaningful occasions of joy, study, and song. Hence an immediate blessing always comes together with, and precisely when, we perform the commandment: "the reward for a commandment is the very fulfillment of the commandment" – built-in!

In the instance of transgressions, there is also a built-in punishment; evil bears bitter fruit, the sinner is eventually discovered, unfaithfulness and deception destroy relationships and undermine families. However, unlike the blessing, the "built-in" curse is often not experienced until later on, sometimes not until the last years of the life of the transgressor. Hence the adverb used by the Torah is not when – which connotes immediacy – but is rather "if you do not internalize the commandments," then the curse will come, but not necessarily right away.

Although this is the ultimate truth regarding the immediate reward of the mitzva and the eventual punishment of the transgression, the accompanying emotion when doing the one or the other may be quite different, even opposite.

The great Hasidic sage known as the Shpolle Zeide explained that the most fundamental lesson of all is the ability to distinguish between good deed and transgression, to overcome the evil impulse by embracing the former and distancing oneself from the latter. He tells how, as a child, he would go to a shvitz (a

steam bath – the much larger and more vigorous European version of our contemporary sauna) with his father, who would pour out a small bucket of freezing water upon him just as he would begin to perspire profusely. “Ooh!” he would inadvertently scream as the cold water contacted his burning-hot flesh; but – after cooling down a bit – he would exclaim happily, “Aah!” (I myself had the exact same experience as a child attending the Tenth Street Baths on the Lower East Side every Thursday evening with my father and grandfather; may their souls rest in peace.)

“Remember, my child, the lesson of the ‘ooh’ and ‘aah,’” the Shpolle would hear from his father. Before (and often even during) the commission of a transgression, you have physical enjoyment – “aah.” But afterwards, when you ponder your sin and suffer its consequences – “ooh!” In the case of a mitzva, however, you might cry “ooh” when you have to get up early for prayers or for a lesson of Daf Yomi, but in reflection of your religious accomplishment, you will always exclaim “aah” afterwards. Make sure you conclude your life with an “aah” and not with an “ooh!”

The underlying assumption of this interpretation is that aside from the natural cause and effect of our actions, the Almighty does not extrinsically reward the righteous or punish the sinner in this world; one does not have the right to expect that if one is an honest businessman, one will be guaranteed great profits, or that if one observes the Sabbath, one will live a long and healthy life. This world, according to many of our Talmudic sages, is a world of freedom of choice for every individual. If the righteous would consistently be rewarded with long life, good health, and a large bank account, and the sinners would die at an early age in poverty, choosing to follow the commandments would be a no-brainer. Free choice precludes extrinsic rewards; free choice also means that an individual can even choose to do something which the Almighty does not desire. This world is largely a result of human action and natural happenstance: “There is no [extrinsic] reward for the commandments in this world” (Kiddushin 39b).

Indeed, the only guarantee that the Almighty makes is the eternity of the Jewish people: Israel will never be destroyed. We are assured of our return to our ancestral homeland no matter how long or arduous the exile, and the eventual perfection of human society. As far as everything else is concerned, “not on individual merit does the length of one’s life, the number and quality of one’s children, and the extent of one’s sustenance depend, but rather on luck (mazel) do these things depend” (Moed Katan 28a).

We also believe in the reality of the human soul, the “portion of God from on high,” which resides within every one of us created in the divine image. Just as God is indestructible, so is the soul indestructible, the physical dimension of our beings may pass away at the end of our lifetimes, but the soul – our spirit essence

which emanates from the Divine – lives eternally. To the extent that we develop our spiritual selves in our lifetimes – in deed and in thought – we prepare for ourselves a continued eternal life in the dimension of the divine.
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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

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

The depths of loyalty of Soviet Jewry, to their inner faith, is seen in the fact that somehow millions of Soviet Jews still knew when the Jewish holidays would occur. For the calendar is the rhythm of our lives and evokes with it memory, hope and a feeling of the timelessness of Jewish life and its traditions. As such, the mere existence of the Jewish calendar posed a threat to the atheistic, cruel Communist regime that ruled then over a large part of humankind. The calendar in Jewish life and thought does not really only mark the passage of time gone by. Rather, it focuses on time that is yet to come, on the future, which can somehow always be brighter than was the past.

One of my younger grandchildren proudly told me that he had calculated how many years in the future a certain anomaly on the Jewish calendar, regarding erev Pesach, would occur. I bless him that he lives to see it but he is already certainly enthusiastic about the prospect and looks forward to its happening. The calendar supplies us with a vision of the future and allows us the ability to feel that we are masters of our own fate and that we can, by our own efforts, be influential in determining our destiny.

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

The parsha of Re’eh always falls in the month of Elul, leading to the glorious month of Tishrei with its days of awe and compassion and the celebration of Torah and its commandments on Succot. The review of the Jewish year, which occupies a great deal of the subject matter of this week’s parsha, is therefore most fitting for it prepares us not only for the coming month but for the coming year generally. Though the future is always inscrutable, we can nevertheless be comforted and feel secure by the consistency of our calendar, which has marked the journey of the Jewish people through time

and centuries. The Jewish calendar reminds us daily of our uniqueness as a people and of the eternity of our Torah and our faith. It thus fits rather neatly into Moshe's overall message to the Jewish people as recorded for us here in the book of Dvarim. The passage of time itself is one of the life's gifts bestowed upon us by our Creator. ©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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

While a prophet may not change Torah law, he may override it temporarily – except in the case of idolatry. No prophet may advocate idol worship, no matter the circumstances. If he does, or if he attempts to permanently change Jewish law, he is considered a navi sheker (false prophet) even if he is able to perform miracles (Deuteronomy 13:2–6; Maimonides, Introduction to Mishnah).

The obvious question is, how can a false prophet have the ability to perform miracles? Several answers are offered.

Rabbi Akiva contends that when the Torah speaks of a prophet performing miracles, the prophet was then a true one. Only after deflecting to the wrong path and becoming a false prophet does he lose the ability to perform miracles (Sanhedrin 90a).

According to this view, notwithstanding one's achievement or spiritual level, there is always the possibility of later falling. Rabbi Akiva's comment may be predicated on his life experiences. Having risen from illiteracy to become the rabbis' rabbi, he understood that people can dramatically change – for the better or for the worse.

Two other approaches need mention: Maimonides argues that the false prophet may perform what appears to be supernatural but is not. What one sees is nothing less than a deception. In Maimonides's words: "And we may be sure that those signs [brought about by the false prophets] were performed with trickery and sorcery" (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Fundamentals of the Torah 8:3).

Nachmanides sees such miracles differently, arguing that what one sees may indeed have occurred. When considering that most human beings only use a small portion of their brains, it follows that this false prophet may have mastered how to use a slightly larger portion, which allows him to perform the supernatural. The talent to use one's ability more fully than others is not indicative of being a true prophet (Nachmanides, Deuteronomy 18:9).

This disagreement between Maimonides and Nachmanides follows their pattern of discourse. Maimonides was a rationalist. He therefore could not entertain that a false prophet could do the miraculous –

in his view, it must be a deception.

Nachmanides, on the other hand, was of a mystical bent. The false prophet can perform the supernatural – but so what? Some people have that ability, but that is not enough to prove one's authenticity.

Despite these different approaches, Maimonides and Nachmanides share a view that miracles (or acts that appear miraculous) cannot prove that a prophet is truthful. In the words of Moses Mendelssohn, "According to the laws of my faith, miraculous acts are no touchstone of truth, and a miracle cannot be accepted with moral certainty as evidence that a prophet has been sent by God" (Biur).

Nehama Leibowitz, who cites Mendelssohn's words, adds, "It is...the content of the prophet's message which is the decisive factor, and if it violates the principles enunciated in the Torah, we must not give it credence." ©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

"Guard and listen to all these things... so it shall be good for you and your children, when you do what is good and right in the eyes of Hashem, your G-d." (Devarim 12:28) This posuk is similar to two pesukim earlier (6:17-18), where we were exhorted to guard the mitzvos and do that which is right and good in Hashem's eyes so that we merit the land Hashem promised us.

There are some subtle differences between the two, and some similarities. There, for example, Rashi says the Torah is speaking about compromising and making peace rather than strict judgments according to the letter of the law, which he does not say here. In both cases, there is an aspect of guarding the Torah and Mitzvos, teaching us that this is the source of our ultimate happiness in life, in this world and the next.

Here, Rashi says that the "good" you do, refers to how your acts are viewed in the eyes of Hashem, while the "right" that you do, is in the eyes of people. The Bechor Shor, on the other hand, switches them and says that one can only do good (i.e. favors) for people, but for Hashem he does what is right and proper.

Regardless of which one you say refers to Hashem's view versus Man's view, both of them are ultimately, "In the eyes of Hashem, your G-d." What does it mean to be doing what Man appreciates, if it still has to align with what Hashem wants? What is Man's view is in opposition to Hashem's view?

The truth is that the posuk exhorts us to do what is good in the eyes of people, only when it complements what Hashem wants. As the Ramban explains there in Vaeschanan, Hashem gave some examples of how to treat our fellow man, but leaves it to us to extrapolate

more ways to act, perhaps beyond the letter of the law, which take into account treating our fellow man as Hashem would want us to. These ways are also called, "in the eyes of Man," because Hashem didn't dictate them specifically, but to people it seems like the right thing to do.

That said, before we do what people believe is right, we must have a solid basis of Torah within us. As Rashi says, "The Mishna which you must guard in your belly so you don't forget it." We must review and internalize Torah constantly, just as we must eat constantly to remain full. Only after that will we be able to do what is right in the eyes of Mankind and still right in Hashem's. Who knows? Maybe that's where the idea of a gut instinct comes from, from being so full of Torah that you know what the right thing to do is, even if Hashem didn't spell it out.

A father and son were traveling on their way, riding on a donkey. People saw them and commented how cruel they were to make the donkey carry the double load of two passengers. Hearing this, the son jumped off and the people said, "Look at that mean father who rides while his son walks." The father then went down and the son went up to ride. "Look at that disrespectful son who rides like a king while his poor father walks beside him on foot." No matter what they did, people found fault.

With no other choice, the son climbed down and they both walked alongside the donkey. "Look at those idiots," the people said. "They have a donkey, and walk beside it instead of riding." But they couldn't ride because everything they tried was met with criticism. So what did they do? They lifted the donkey and let it ride on their shoulders! (I'm sure some misguided people thought they'd finally gotten it right!)

The moral of the story is: do what is right and don't bother trying to please everyone. ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Bal Tosif

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

It is forbidden to add onto the *mitzvot*. This includes extending a mitzva in time (such as adding an extra day to a holiday), increasing its quantity (such as adding a fifth species to one's *lulav*, or a fifth biblical text inside one's *tefillin*), or creating a new mitzva. An obvious question arises: how then could our Sages prohibit actions that were not prohibited by the Torah, such as eating chicken with milk?

Some answer that the prohibition of *Bal Tosif* applies only if those making an addition claim that it is a mitzva in the Torah. No one ever claimed that eating chicken with milk is biblically prohibited.

Others state that the law of *Bal Tosif* applies only to adding positive commandments. In contrast, our Sages were allowed to prohibit additional things. This

answer, though, does not explain how the Sages were permitted to create the holidays of Purim and Chanukah.

An example of extending a mitzva in time is sitting in the *sukkah* on Shmini Atzeret, the day which follows Sukkot and on which there is no mitzva to sit in the *sukkah* (at least in Israel; it is more complicated in the Diaspora). Some *Rishonim* write that one may do so if he makes sure there is a *heker*, something unusual, to make it clear that he is not trying to fulfill a mitzva. Along the same lines, Rav Kook states that a *heker* was necessary for the rabbinically-added holidays, so no one could confuse them with biblical *mitzvot*. Thus, Purim is celebrated on different dates depending upon whether or not one lives in a walled city. There is no comparable rule for any other mitzva. And Chanukah lighting has different levels of observance – the minimal requirement, the enhanced level, and the extra-enhanced level. This too is unique.

Two types of additions do not constitute a problem of *Bal Tosif* according to most opinions. One type is adding in frequency. For example, performing the same mitzva numerous times a day is not prohibited. A second type is broadening the ranks of those who perform a mitzva. For example, a woman is allowed to perform a mitzva from which she is exempt. Nevertheless, there is an opinion that even these two types transgress the prohibition of *Bal Tosif*, if the person performing an extra mitzva mistakenly believes the Torah mandates it. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Killing takes a toll -- on the killed, of course; that's pretty obvious. But also on the killers.

That is something that the Ohr Hachaim introduces in his commentary on the pasuk "And He will give you mercy and have mercy upon you" (Devarim, 13:18).

That "give you mercy" is his focus. He writes: "This act of killing [here of the idolaters of an ir hanidachas] creates a natural cruelty in the heart of a person."

He continues by referring to what "we are told by the sect of Yishmaelim who murder at the command of the leader, that they experience a great euphoria when they kill a man, and the natural feeling of pity is extinguished in them..."

Therefore, he explains, "Hashem assures the Jews that [after their commanded act of killing], their innate feelings of mercy... will be returned to them anew" despite their having been weakened through the act of killing.

And, further, that they will thereby be granted Heavenly mercy themselves, since "Hashem has mercy only on the merciful."

Modern psychiatry recognizes something called

"perpetrator trauma," a presentation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms caused by an act or acts of killing.

But what the Ohr Hachaim is expounding upon is a different upshot of perpetrating violence: the erosion of the natural human instinct of mercy.

And his report about not only the post-murder desensitization of assassins (the word "assassin," as it happens, derived from an Arabic name for the reputedly murderous Nizari Ismaili sect) but of their being enthralled by taking lives resonates all too strongly today, when we have seen Yishmaeli murderers exulting after killing men, women and children. Even the mere imagining of murdering Jews is enough to enrapture some, as they joyfully and mindlessly chant their hope to rid the Holy Land of Jews "from the river to the sea."

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RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Centralized Temple

Parashat Re'ei is an important parasha because it ranges from a directive to choose between a blessing and a curse, a decree to destroy all forms of idol worship, the importance of the centralized Temple where korbanot, sacrifices, were to be brought, the laws of shemittah, a list of kosher animals and their signs, up to the instructions for the various Holy days of the year. At this time, we will deal only with the importance of a centralized Temple.

The Torah states, "You shall not do like all that we do here today – (rather) every man what is proper in his eyes – for you will not have come to the resting place and to the heritage that Hashem, your Elokim, gives you. Only at the place that Hashem, your Elokim, will choose from all your tribes to place His Name there, you shall seek out His resting place and come there. And there you shall bring your olah offerings and your sacrifices, and your tithes and what is raised of your hand, your vow offerings and your free-will offerings, and the firstborn of your cattle and your flocks. You shall eat there before Hashem, your Elokim, and you shall rejoice in all that you have undertaken, you and your households, as Hashem, your Elokim, has blessed you." Later, in the reiteration of this idea, the Torah states, "Then it shall be that the place where Hashem, your Elokim, will choose to rest His Name – there shall you bring everything that I command you, your olah offerings and your peace offering sacrifices, your tithes and what is raised of your hand, and the choicest of your vow offerings that you will vow to Hashem. You shall rejoice before Hashem, your Elokim, you, your sons and your daughters, your slaves and your maidservants, and the Levite (Levi and Kohein) who is in your cities, for he has no share and inheritance with you. Beware of yourself lest you bring up your olah offerings in any place that you see. Rather, only in the place that Hashem will choose among one of your tribes, there shall you bring up your olah offerings, and there

shall you do all that I command you."

The Torah instructs us to bring our offerings and sacrifices only in the place where Hashem was to dwell. This should not be confused with bringing all slaughtering of meat to the Temple. Hashem continues in His instructions later, that it was understood that Man had a craving for meat. "But in all the desire of your soul you may slaughter and eat meat, according to the blessing that Hashem, your Elokim will have given you in all your cities; the impure one and the pure one may eat it, like the deer and the hart." These were regular slaughtering of animals, not with the offering's parts taken off and presented on the Altar as was required in the Temple. The life-blood of the animal was to be spilled on the ground and covered with dirt or sand, as opposed to the life-blood of a sacrifice which was sprinkled on the Altar. This was intended to disrupt the practice of the pagan-tribes that were to be expelled from the land. They spread their altars throughout the land and sacrificed to their gods on these altars. Israel was to have a central Temple of Hashem's choosing, and only there were sacrifices to be offered.

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the acquisition of the Place for the Temple depended on word from the prophet that this was indeed the Place that Hashem had chosen as His dwelling place. King David purchased the land from its previous owner Arona, the Jebusite, for six hundred shekels. He paid fifty shekel on behalf of his tribe, Yehudah, and collected fifty shekel each from all the other tribes so that the purchase was a united effort. This was a very important aspect of the Temple. Even though the Torah states that land would be taken from one tribe for the building of the Temple, the purchase of the land and the building of the Temple was a unified effort.

Rashi explains that the tithes referred to are the "ma'aser rishon and the ma'aser sheni, the first and second tithes," while "what is raised of your hand" refers to the heave-offerings of the first fruits. The Ramban explains that the sentence began with the offerings that were to be eaten only in Jerusalem, the city of the Temple, and then mentioned the tithes which were to be given to the Kohein and the Levi, the guardians of the Sanctuary, so that they would rejoice with the B'nei Yisrael from the produce which was the gift from Hashem. The Kohein and Levi owned no property as an ancestral inheritance since they would be distracted by that property and fail to serve in the Temple. The only way for them to participate in the joy of Hashem's gift to the B'nei Yisrael was through the tithes that were brought to the Temple.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin and others point out that, in the desert, there was no commandment to bring sacrifices, the firstborn animals, nor to make a pilgrimage to the Temple on the three Pilgrimage Festivals, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, since these were tied to the land and the Temple that would exist in

the land. In the desert, the people were to bring “every man what is proper in his eyes.” During the years of conquest, individual altars were permitted. Once the people had entered the land and had secured their individual places of inheritance, these individual altars were not permitted as long as a centralized Temple existed. When the first seven tribes had conquered their lands, a temporary Temple was established in Gilgal. Individual altars were acceptable then, because many could still not travel safely between their portion of the land and the Temple in Gilgal. Only when a “permanent” Temple was built in Shiloh, later in Ohn, and finally the place for Hashem’s permanent residence was signaled to be in Jerusalem, were personal altars not permitted for sacrifices.

This entire section mirrors the theme that we have seen over the past several parshiot: though each of the tribes was to maintain its individuality, marked by its own leadership, flag, and boundaries, the unity of the Jewish People was essential among the tribes in their religious practices and observance of the Torah. This was a new concept in this part of the world and certainly within the world as a whole. Most nations which existed before this time were a vague collection of tribal families with a limited unity that was brought about through a conquering king or group of kings. While this “unity” might have been sufficient for protection, there was no unity of religion or religious practices. Each tribal family had its own set of practices, house gods, and religious laws. This could not become the religious practice of the Jewish People. They had experienced a singular Hashem, received the same set of Laws and practices, and experienced the unifying encampment in the desert around a centralized Temple, the Mishkan. Now that they were entering the land, that unity was partially dissolved by inheritance, but was still necessary for its religion.

Today we are often polarized by the separations in Judaism. May we return to a time when we recognize that we are all One People and One Religion, with One Hashem. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

The Torah mentions the borders of the Promised Land five times, but only gives specifics once. The other four times, the markers provided are quite ambiguous. For example, does “the desert” refer to the Negev and the Sinai Peninsula in the south, or the Syrian Desert in the east? The Euphrates is both north and east of the Promised Land, originating in Turkey, flowing southeast and emptying into the Persian Gulf. Which part of the Euphrates is the boundary? Does the Torah really mean to include all of Lebanon and Jordan and parts of Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq in the Promised Land? Additionally, the ambiguous boundaries seem to be larger than the specific ones, with even the

ambiguous boundaries differing from one another. How are they to be understood?

Unsurprisingly, the commentators give very different answers to these questions, and a full treatment of the subject would take numerous lengthy articles. Nevertheless, I’d like to share some thoughts on each of the Torah’s presentations of these boundaries.

In Bereishis (15:18), G-d promised Avram (his name hadn’t been changed to Avraham yet) that his descendants will get “this land, from the River of Egypt to the great river – the Euphrates River.” Although only two markers are given, since He was referring to “this land,” no western boundary was necessary, as the Mediterranean Sea is west of “this land.” Similarly, south of the Sinai Peninsula is the Yam Suf (Red Sea), so the only part of the south that needed to be clarified was the Negev and the Sinai Peninsula. Whether these were included in the “Promised Land” depends on whether the “River of Egypt” refers to Wadi el-Arish, which flows north and west through the northern Sinai Peninsula, emptying into the Mediterranean just south of Gaza, or to the easternmost branch of the Nile Delta. The lands beyond the vast Syrian Desert to the east can’t be considered “this land,” so the part of the Euphrates to the east, which is beyond this desert, can’t be what G-d was referring to, leaving us with the part to the north (and perhaps northeast). Keep in mind, though, that (as R’ Yaakov Kamenetsky points out) Avraham’s descendants include Yishmael, Eisav and the sons of Keturah, so this area need not be designated just for the descendants of Yaakov (although this might be mitigated by 21:12). Another point to keep in mind is that “this land” is described as being inhabited by ten nations (not just seven), so must be a larger area than the specific boundaries delineated in Sefer Bamidbar. (And, since many say the land of two of those three additional nations became Ammon and Moav, Avraham’s list of descendants can be expanded to include the descendants of his nephew, Lot.)

At Sinai (Shemos 23:31), G-d set the borders as being “from the Yam Suf to the Sea of the Pelishtim, and from the desert to the river.” The Sea of the Pelishtim is clearly the Mediterranean Sea, even though it refers specifically to the southern coastline (since it’s likely how a nation that spent centuries in Egypt would refer to it). Does the “from-to” formulation indicate that G-d was first describing the boundaries from west to east – with the Yam Suf referring to the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, and then from south to north – with “the desert” referring to the Negev and/or the Sinai Peninsula, or did G-d give the boundaries in no particular order, starting from the south (referring to the entire Yam Suf, thereby including the entire Sinai Peninsula), moving to the west (the Mediterranean Sea), then to the desert in the east, and finally to the northern part of “the river” (the Euphrates)? Besides the “from-to” verbiage indicating that it was west to east and south to north, since they were at Sinai when

these boundaries were given, if the Sinai Peninsula was within them, they would have already been in the Promised Land! Nevertheless, these boundaries are more extensive than those in Sefer Bamidbar, and were presented in the future tense (“I will set”), so likely referred to potential/eventual boundaries, which were never realized – certainly not before the nation crossed the Jordan River and started conquering the land there.

At Arvos Moav (Bamidbar 34:1-15), the specific boundaries of the Promised Land are given clockwise (south-west-north-east). Included in the southern boundary is “the Wadi of Egypt,” which flows “into the Mediterranean Sea.” Is this the same as the earlier-mentioned River of Egypt that had, over the centuries, slowed from a river to a stream? Or was the River of Egypt the easternmost branch of the Nile Delta, while the Wadi of Egypt is Wadi el-Arish? The “Shichor,” which is the southern edge of the part of the land that wasn’t conquered during Yehoshua’s lifetime, is described as being “on the face of Egypt” (Yehoshua 13:3), indicating that this was the southern border, with Egypt on the other side. It was definitely the southern border of King David’s kingdom (Divray Hayamim I 13:5), and his kingdom never extended beyond Wadi el-Arish, indicating that the Shichor is another name for the Wadi of Egypt, and refers to Wadi el-Arish. Wadi el-Arish also fits with the other southern boundary markers.

Significantly, the Euphrates is not included in the specific boundaries in Sefer Bamidbar, even though it’s included in the other four.

The boundaries given at Sinai/Choreiv are referenced again in Devarim (1:7), although the description here is mostly a list of areas included within the Promised Land, with the only boundary being the Euphrates. The context, with הלבנון being the last area mentioned, indicates that the Euphrates is the northern boundary, telling us how far north the Promised Land extends.

The final mention of the boundaries in the Torah (Devarim 11:24, which closely matches those given in Yehoshua 1:3-4) can be understood in a couple of ways. First we’re told that wherever we tread will be ours, then we seem to be given limits within which our treading makes it ours. It can also be understood as telling us the starting point (the minimally required boundaries), which can be expanded to “wherever we tread.” This is how the Sifri (51), referenced by Ramban (Devarim 11:24), understands it.

The boundaries given here are “from the desert and the Levanon, from the river – the Euphrates River – and until the last sea.” The “last sea” certainly refers to the Mediterranean Sea, with the most straightforward way of explaining these boundaries being “from the desert in the south until the Levanon in the north, with the northernmost part stretching from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean Sea.” No eastern boundary was given, since they were in the east at the time (at Arvos

Moav), and the full western boundary wasn’t necessary (it was obviously the Mediterranean Sea), so only the south-north boundaries were given, including the extent of the northern area (described from east to west).

It turns out, then, that the first three mentions of the Euphrates are using it as the northern boundary, while the fourth uses it as the eastern boundary of the northernmost section. What this means and why it was necessary will be discussed next week, G-d willing, along with the differences between the specific boundaries given in Bamidbar and the general boundaries given in Bereishis, Shemos and Devarim. For now, though, the takeaways should be that (1) there’s a difference between the general boundaries and the specific ones; (2) “the desert” refers to the Negev and at least the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula; (3) the “Wadi of Egypt” refers to Wadi el-Arish; and (4) the part of the Euphrates River being used as a boundary is its northern part. Stay tuned as I expand upon these thoughts. ©2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Re’eh tells us that “no prophet may advocate idol worship no matter the circumstances. If he does he is considered a false prophet, even if he’s able to perform miracles” (Deuteronomy 13:2-6). The obvious question is: How can a false prophet have the ability to perform miracles?

Rabbi Akiva (in Talmud Sanhedrin 90a) contends that when the Torah speaks of this prophet performing miracles, the prophet was then a true prophet, and only later did he deflect to the wrong path. Once becoming a false prophet he is no longer able to perform miracles. As Rabbi Avi Weiss extracts, this answer underscores a critical concept in Judaism, especially as the month of Elul, the thirty days of introspection before the High Holidays begin: notwithstanding one’s achievement or spiritual level there is always the possibility of failing (i.e. false prophet), and an equal possibility of improvement (i.e. Teshuva -- repentance -- before Rosh Hashana). While the Parsha depicts a prophet that has fallen from grace, rising to grace is just as viable. Just like the prophet, we are judged based on where we are now, and how much we’ve improved, not on where we once were. ©2014 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

