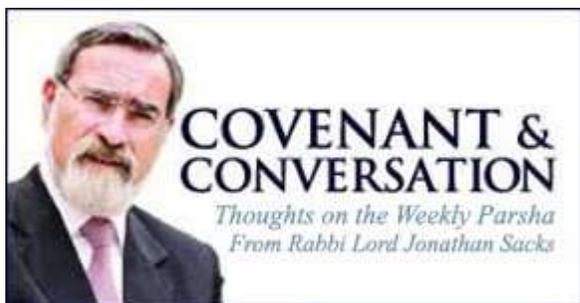


In This Issue:

- **"Covenant and Conversation"** by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
- **"M'oray Ha'Aish"** by Rabbi Ari Kahn
- **"Torah Teasers"** by Rabbi Moshe Erlbaum
- **"The Guiding Light"** by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen



Not Beyond the Sea

When I was a student at university in the late 1960s - the era of student protests, psychedelic drugs, and the Beatles meditating with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi - a story went the rounds. An American Jewish woman in her sixties travelled to north India to see a celebrated guru. There were huge crowds waiting to see the holy man, but she pushed through, saying that she needed to see him urgently. Eventually, after weaving through the swaying crowds, she entered the tent and stood in the presence of the master himself. What she said that day has entered the realm of legend. She said, "Marvin, listen to your mother. Enough already. Come home."

Starting in the sixties Jews made their way into many religions and cultures with one notable exception: their own. Yet Judaism has historically had its mystics and meditators, its poets and philosophers, its holy men and women, its visionaries and prophets. It has often seemed as if the longing we have for spiritual enlightenment is in direct proportion to its distance, its foreignness, its unfamiliarity. We prefer the far to the near.

Moses already foresaw this possibility:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Deut. 30:11-14)

Moses sensed prophetically that in the future Jews would say that to find inspiration we have to ascend to heaven or cross the sea. It is anywhere but here. So it was for much of Israel's history during the First and Second Temple periods. First came the era in which the people were tempted by the gods of the people around them: the Canaanite Baal, the Moabite Chemosh, or Marduk and Astarte in Babylon. Later, in Second Temple times, they were attracted to Hellenism in its Greek or Roman forms. It is a strange phenomenon, best expressed in the memorable line of Groucho Marx: "I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." Jews have long had a tendency to fall in love with people who do not love them and pursue almost any spiritual path so long as it is not their own. But it is very debilitating.

When great minds leave Judaism, Judaism loses great minds. When those in search of spirituality go elsewhere, Jewish spirituality suffers. And this tends to happen in precisely the paradoxical way that Moses describes several times in Deuteronomy. It occurs in ages of affluence, not poverty, in eras of freedom, not slavery. When we seem to have little to thank God for, we thank God. When we have much to be grateful for, we forget.

The eras in which Jews worshipped idols or became Hellenised were Temple times when Jews lived in their land, enjoying either sovereignty or autonomy. The age in which, in Europe, they abandoned Judaism was the period of Emancipation, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, when for the first time they enjoyed civil rights.

The surrounding culture in most of these cases was hostile to Jews and Judaism. Yet Jews often preferred to adopt the culture that rejected them rather than embrace the one that was theirs by birth and inheritance, where they had the chance of feeling at home. The results were often tragic.

Becoming Baal worshippers did not lead to Israelites being welcomed by the Canaanites. Becoming Hellenised did not

endear Jews to either the Greeks or the Romans. Abandoning Judaism in the nineteenth century did not end antisemitism; it inflamed it. Hence the power of Moses' insistence: to find truth, beauty, and spirituality, you do not have to go elsewhere. "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

The result was that Jews enriched other cultures more than their own. Part of Mahler's Eighth Symphony is a Catholic mass. Irving Berlin, son of a chazzan, wrote "White Christmas." Felix Mendelssohn, grandson of one of the first "enlightened" Jews, Moses Mendelssohn, composed church music and rehabilitated Bach's long-neglected St Matthew Passion. Simone Weil, one of the deepest Christian thinkers of the twentieth century - described by Albert Camus as "the only great spirit of our times" - was born to Jewish parents. So was Edith Stein, celebrated by the Catholic Church as a saint and martyr, but murdered in Auschwitz because to the Nazis she was a Jew. And so on.

Was it the failure of Europe to accept the Jewishness of Jews and Judaism? Was it Judaism's failure to confront the challenge? The phenomenon is so complex it defies any simple explanation. But in the process, we lost great art, great intellect, great spirits and minds.

To some extent the situation has changed both in Israel and in the Diaspora. There has been much new Jewish music and a revival of Jewish mysticism. There have been important Jewish writers and thinkers. But we still spiritually underachieve. The deepest roots of spirituality come from within: from within a culture, a tradition, a sensibility. They come from the syntax and semantics of the native language of the soul: "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

The beauty of Jewish spirituality is precisely that in Judaism God is close. You do not need to climb a mountain or enter an ashram to find the Divine Presence. It is there around the table at a Shabbat meal, in the light of the candles and the simple holiness of the Kiddush wine and the challot, in the praise of the Eishet Chayil and the blessing of children, in the peace of mind that comes when you leave the world to look after itself for a day while you celebrate the good things that come not from working but resting, not from buying but enjoying - the gifts you have had all along but did not have time to appreciate.

In Judaism, God is close. He is there in the poetry of the psalms, the greatest literature of the soul ever written. He is there

listening in to our debates as we study a page of the Talmud or offer new interpretations of ancient texts. He is there in the joy of the festivals, the tears of Tisha B'Av, the echoes of the shofar of Rosh Hashanah, and the contrition of Yom Kippur. He is there in the very air of the land of Israel and the stones of Jerusalem, where the oldest of the old and the newest of the new mingle together like close friends.

God is near. That is the overwhelming feeling I get from a lifetime of engaging with the faith of our ancestors. Judaism needed no cathedrals, no monasteries, no abstruse theologies, no metaphysical ingenuities - beautiful though all these are - because for us God is the God of everyone and everywhere, who has time for each of us, and who meets us where we are, if we are willing to open our soul to Him.

I am a Rabbi. For many years I was a Chief Rabbi. But in the end I think it was we, the Rabbis, who did not do enough to help people open their doors, their minds, and their feelings to the Presence-beyond-the-universe-who-created-us-in-love that our ancestors knew so well and loved so much. We were afraid - of the intellectual challenges of an aggressively secular culture, of the social challenges of being in yet not entirely of the world, of the emotional challenge of finding Jews or Judaism or the State of Israel criticised and condemned. So we retreated behind a high wall, thinking that made us safe. High walls never make you safe; they only make you fearful.[1] What makes you safe is confronting the challenges without fear and inspiring others to do likewise.

What Moses meant in those extraordinary words, "It is not in heaven...nor is it beyond the sea," was: Kinderlach, your parents trembled when they heard the voice of God at Sinai. They were overwhelmed. They said: If we hear any more we will die. So God found ways in which you could meet Him without being overwhelmed. Yes, He is creator, sovereign, supreme power, first cause, mover of the planets and the stars. But He is also parent, partner, lover, friend. He is Shechinah, from shachen, meaning, the neighbour next door.

So thank Him every morning for the gift of life. Say the Shema twice daily for the gift of love. Join your voice to others in prayer so that His spirit may flow through you, giving you the strength and courage to change the world. When you cannot see Him, it is because you are looking in the wrong direction. When He seems absent, He is there just behind you, but you have to turn to meet Him. Do not treat Him like a stranger. He loves you. He believes in you. He wants your success. To find Him you do not

have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. His is the voice you hear in the silence of the soul. His is the light you see when you open your eyes to wonder. His is the hand you touch in the pit of despair. His is the breath that gives you life.

Shabbat Shalom.

NOTE

1. See Rashi to Num. 13:18.



The High Holy Days: Belief in Man

The Rosh Hashanah - Yom Kippur season is upon us, filling our minds and hearts with so many thoughts and emotions that go beyond our normal framework. This unique time of the Jewish year stands in stark contrast to the New Year's experience marked by the Gregorian calendar: The approach to Rosh Hashanah is counted down by a month of prayer, introspection and rapprochement, while the approach to the secular new year is marked off in shopping days. Rosh Hashanah is steeped in awe and reverence; more often than not, 'new year's day' is characterized by the hangover left from a night of revelry. Throughout the ages and in every corner of the globe, Jews gather in synagogues to hear the shofar, not in Times Square; we kiss the Torah, and not the somewhat inebriated person who happens to be standing nearby.

Yet while our mood is more somber, our thoughts more serious, our holiday season has a festive, even celebratory element as well. This is the frame of mind that envelops us as we connect to holiness and re-discover the purity of our souls. In common with the secular celebration of the new year, we, too, make "new year's resolutions", although our aspirations are of a higher

order and, it is hoped, our resolve greater and our follow-through more successful. Judaism instructs us to use this time to shine a spotlight on our lives and lifestyles. With great thought, soul searching and angst, we strip off the veneer and examine the core of our existence. We are given the opportunity to set aside this time to ask the great existential questions: Who am I? Who do I wish to be? Have I made the wrong choices? Am I falling short? What do I need to change?

This process is called teshuva. To better understand the concept of teshuva, we may view it through the prism of concepts taken from our own frame of reference. One approach is to consider our personal "balance sheet"; the traditional term for this approach is heshbon nefesh, a very personal calculation that allows us to measure the spiritual assets and liabilities accumulated over the course of our daily lives. The process of teshuva allows us to restructure- that is, to convert debts into equity, either through repentance and/or by taking decisions and actions to increase our assets. This is the 'recovery plan' at the core of the High Holy Days: teshuva, tefilla (prayer) and tzedaka (acts of charity) turn us back from the brink of spiritual bankruptcy and dissolution.

The scriptural source for the concept of teshuva is found in Parshat Nitzavim, the Torah reading for this coming Shabbat, read every year just before Rosh Hashanah:

And you will return to God your Lord, and you will obey Him, doing everything that I am commanding you today. You and your children [will repent] with all your heart and with all your soul. (Dvarim 30:2)

The verse seems quite clear, yet rabbinic authorities differ in their understanding of its implications. Some of the sages read this verse as a commandment, requiring every Jew to undergo the process of teshuva we have described. This approach focuses on the first word of the verse, "ve-shavta", 'and you will return', and disregards the larger narrative context in which it appears. Other rabbinic authorities, reading the verse in context, understand it as a description of a time in the future when terrible things befall the Jewish people, and they return to God.

In this vein, we find an intriguing formulation in the writings of Maimonides. While apparently sidestepping the debate regarding

teshuvah as a commandment, Maimonides' thoughts on this verse may be an even more powerful statement:

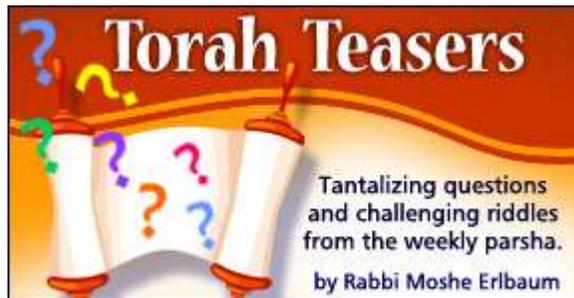
...The Torah has already promised that, ultimately, Israel will repent towards the end of the exile, and will be redeemed immediately, as stated [in the verse]: "There shall come a time when [you will experience] all these things... and you will return to God, your Lord..." (Maimonides, Mishne Torah: Laws of Teshuvah 7:5)

For Maimonides, teshuvah is not just a good idea and sound spiritual accounting; it is the destiny of the Jewish People. This is our future, a glorious national renaissance in which the individuals that comprise the Jewish nation move closer to God and mend their ways. It is the culmination of our history, the light at the end of the tunnel of millennia of suffering and existential struggle.

In a sense, the belief in this glorious future is in actuality a belief in the Jewish People. It is a belief that, as a collective, we have the spiritual sensitivity, intelligence, fortitude and acumen to make the right decisions. It is the belief that each and every Jew has the power to move the nation as a whole in a positive direction. With this understanding, debating whether or not teshuvah is a commandment becomes irrelevant; in this time of heightened awareness, people will undergo the process of repentance solely because it is sound spiritual advice. Whether or not it is required of us, we will be eager to fix the past and recalibrate our souls. We will not need to be commanded to take advantage of an opportunity for our debts to be erased, our spiritual books to be balanced.

Following Maimonides' formulation, the gathering of Jews in synagogues on the High Holy Days may be seen as a microcosm of the messianic age. When houses of prayer fill to capacity, when we feel the unprecedented pull of Jewish souls gravitating towards God, there is more than just guilt at play. This is the fulfillment of the prophecy contained in the verse in Parshat Nitzavim, the expression of the great spiritual renaissance that is part and parcel of Jewish destiny.

May this holiday season be a harbinger of the messianic age, releasing us all from our spiritual debts and uplifting us to the great spiritual heights of which we are capable.



1. This parsha begins with a description of the Jewish people "standing" (netzavim) before Hashem. What 4 other places in the Torah are people described as "standing" (netzavim)?

(1) The angels who come to Avraham in parshas Vayerah are standing (netzavim) over him (Genesis 18:2). (2) In parshas Vayigash, men are standing near Yosef when he wishes to reveal himself to his brothers (Genesis 45:1). (3) In parshas Shemos, when Moshe and Aharon leave Pharaoh after their unsuccessful meeting, men are standing outside the palace waiting to meet them (Exodus 5:20). (4) In parshas Korach, Dathan and Aviram stand outside their tents when Moshe comes to speak to them (Numbers 16:27).

2. Which two ancient professions appear in this parsha?

The professions of a wood-chopper and a water-carrier are in Deuteronomy 29:10.

3. In what context is salt mentioned in this parsha? What 3 other places in the Torah is salt referred to?

Moshe states that when later generations view the destruction of the land, they will see "sulphur and salt, a conflagration of the entire Land" (Deut. 29:22). Elsewhere in the Torah: (1) Salt is mentioned in parshas Vayera when Lot's wife turns to look at the destruction of Sodom and turns into a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26). (2) In parshas Vayikra, we are commanded to add salt to every offering (Leviticus 2:13). (3) In parshas Bamidbar, the eternal covenant with the kohanim is referred to as a "covenant of salt" (Numbers 18:19).

4. Which four cities are mentioned in a single verse in this parsha, and also in a single verse in the book of Genesis?

Sodom, Amora, Adma, and Tzivoyim are all mentioned in a single verse in this parsha (Deut. 29:22). They are also

mentioned (twice) in single verses in parshas Lech Lecha (Genesis 14:2, 8).

5. Which three people appear together in a single verse in this parsha - on two separate occasions?

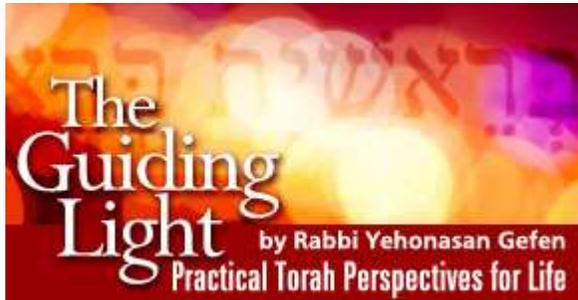
Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov are mentioned together in Deut. 29:12, and in 30:20.

6. In what context is a root (shoresh) mentioned in this parsha?

Moshe compares those who have in mind to serve other gods to a "root flourishing with gall and wormwood" (Deut. 29:17).

7. What item in this parsha is referred to both in the masculine form and the feminine?

A Torah scroll (sefer Torah) is referred to in the feminine form (Deut. 28:61), and in the masculine form (Deut. 29:20) See Rashi (Deut. 29:20) for an explanation.



Taking Responsibility For Ourselves

"This mitzvah that I command you today - it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, [for you] to say, 'who can ascend to the heaven or us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?'" What is the mitzvah that the Torah refers to in this verse? The Ramban writes that it is the mitzvah of teshuva (repentance); the Torah is telling us that teshuva is not something that is out of our grasp, rather it is easily attainable if only we make the effort.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz asks, if the mitzvah of teshuva is so easy to fulfil, then why are there so few people who do teshuva properly? Everyone knows that they make mistakes, so why do they not admit their error and repent?

The following Medrash about the story of Cain and Abel can help us answer this question: After Cain killed Abel, God did not punish him instantly, rather He said "where is Abel your brother?" Cain famously answered, "am I my brother's keeper?" (ibid. 4:9) The Medrash gives more details of Cain's reply: "You are the protector of all life, and You are asking me?!.. I killed him but You gave me the evil inclination, You are supposed to protect everyone and You let me kill him, You are the one that killed him... had You accepted my offering like his, I would not have been jealous of him."

Why didn't Cain do teshuva for his heinous act? Because he refused to accept culpability for his role in the murder - he even blamed it on God! We can now answer our initial question as to why so few people do teshuva properly. We are generally aware that we commit sins but there is one factor that prevents us from repenting properly, the ability to accept that the ultimate responsibility for our actions lies with us and us alone. There are many factors to which we can easily attribute our flaws; whether it be our upbringing, our natural inclinations, or our society, we find it extremely hard to accept ultimate responsibility for our failings. The prerequisite for teshuva is a recognition that 'I could have done better; I could have overcome my yetzer hara (negative inclination) and not sinned.' Without the ability to make this difficult admission we cannot begin to repent properly but with it teshuva is easily attainable.

This inability to admit our guilt lies at the core of the first and most decisive sin in human history which plagues us to this very day - that of Adam. We traditionally attribute Adam's sin to his disobeying God's instructions not to eat from the fruit, and it was this that caused Adam and Eve to be expelled from the Garden of Eden with all the accompanying negative consequences. Rav Motty Berger points out that on closer analysis it is clear that they were not punished immediately after the sin. Rather, God engaged Adam in conversation, giving him the opportunity to admit his mistake. However, Adam did not accept this reprieve, instead he said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me - she gave me of the tree and I ate." Adam avoided responsibility for his sin, shifting it onto Eve and even God himself for giving her to him initially. Then God turned to Eve, also giving her a chance to repent - she too declined the offer, saying, "the serpent deceived me and I ate." Only then did God punish them for the sin. It is clear that had they taken responsibility for their actions when God confronted them, then surely the punishment would have been far lighter. Who knows how different the course of history could have been!

We see from the stories of Adam and Cain that the ability to admit one's mistakes is perhaps even more important than not sinning! Indeed we all err at some point, it is whether we can stand up and admit the truth for our actions that is the true judge of our spiritual level. It was only several hundred years after the sad beginning of history that a man arose who would shoulder the responsibility for his actions and rectify the mistake of Adam. The Tosefta says, "Why did Judah merit the Kingship? Because he admitted [to his actions] in the incident of Tamar." Tamar was about to be burned at the stake for her alleged act of adultery, when she gave Yehuda the chance to admit to his part in the events. He could easily have remained quiet, thereby sentencing three souls to death - Tamar and the twins inside her. However, in a defining moment in history, he bravely accepted accountability, saying, "she is right, it is from me." It is no coincidence that this was the key moment in producing the seed of the Messiah. We know that the Messiah is the person who will bring mankind back to its pristine state of before the sin, rectifying the mistake of Adam and Eve. The way in which to repair the damage done by a sin is by correcting the negative trait displayed in that sin. As we have seen, the main flaw present in Adam's sin was an inability to accept responsibility for mistakes, therefore Judah's success in taking responsibility for his actions was an ideal rectification.

The intrinsic connection between Messiah and taking responsibility continued strongly amongst Judah's most distinguished descendant, King David. The Talmud tells us that King Saul sinned once and subsequently lost his kingdom, whereas David sinned twice and remained king. Why was Saul treated so much more harshly than David? The Prophet, Samuel confronted Saul after he had not destroyed all of Amalek as he was commanded. But instead of admitting his mistake, Shaul justified his actions, denying he even sinned. Then he blamed it on the people for pressuring him to leave over some of Amalek's animals to be offerings. After a lengthy back and forth, Shaul finally did repent but it was too late and Shmuel informed him that he had lost his right to the kingship. In contrast, after David's sin in the incident of Batsheva, The Prophet, Nathan sternly rebuked him for his actions, and David immediately replied, "I have sinned to God." David showed his willingness to take responsibility for his mistakes by immediately admitting his guilt unlike Shaul. Therefore he was forgiven and given another chance to continue as King. Moreover, the kabbalistic sources write that King David is a reincarnation of Adam and that his purpose was to rectify Adam's sin. It seems very apparent that one of the main ways in which King David rectified the sin was by taking responsibility for his error so quickly.

We live in a society today that shuns the concept of responsibility - many educated people claim that no-one can be held liable for his behaviour. They argue that essentially we do not have any free will, the person that we become is predestined based on our background, upbringing, genetics and society. Consequently, criminals can be excused of their crimes on the basis that they really had no choice in the matter, and people can tolerate the failings in their relationships and character traits as being unavoidable. The Torah outlook strongly rejects this view. If a person is brave enough to admit that he can do better then God will surely help him do so.

We see this from the Talmud about a man called Elazar ben Durdaya. He was a man who was steeped in immorality; however he suddenly came to a realization of the error of his ways. The Talmud then proceeds to tell us how he tried to gain forgiveness for his sins. He sat between a mountain and a hill and asked them to request mercy for him but they refused. He then asked the heavens and earth to request mercy for him but they also refused. He finally turned to the sun and the moon but they also refused to help him.(1)

Rav Yissochor Frand brings a homiletical explanation of this Gemara. The different things whom he asked to pray for him represent different influences on his life; he was trying to shift responsibility for his behaviour onto them. The mountain and hill represent his parents. He argued that his upbringing was responsible for his dire situation, but they refused to acknowledge their guilt. He then turned to the heavens and earth who represent his environment and tried to blame that for his actions, but they also would not accept responsibility for his sins. He finally turned to the sun and the moon who represent his mazal, his natural inclinations, and claimed that it was impossible to avoid sinning because of his nature. But again, they would not accept culpability for his behaviour. Then the Gemara states that he said "this thing is only dependent on myself." He finally acknowledged that there was only one source responsible for his sins - himself. He could not blame his parents, society or nature, he realised that he had the power to change his ways and he did so. He then did complete teshuva and his soul returned to heaven and a Heavenly Voice came out, proclaiming that Rebbi Elazar ben Durdaya has a place in the Next World. The commentaries note that the Voice called him 'Rebbi' because he is our Rebbi in teshuva - he teaches us that the only way to do proper teshuva is to admit that the ultimate responsibility for our behaviour lies only with ourselves. If we can do this, then we can hope to do complete teshuva.

NOTE

1. Obviously this Gemara should not be taken literally.
-

See more great
parsha essays at:
www.aish.com/tp/