

Opening Lines

Using the opening verses of every Parsha in the Torah to inspire the Jewish people.

Kyle Zaldin

Foreword

Moshe Rabbeinu introduces an account of his prayers to enter the Holy Land with the words, “*Va’eschanan el Hashem ba’eis ha’hi leimor*”. Literally translated, these words mean, “And I beseeched Hashem at that time, saying.” In his sefer *Degel Machaneh Ephraim*, Rebbe Ephraim of Sudlykov, grandson of the holy Baal Shem Tov, offers an alternative interpretation.

In addition to his individual legacy, Moshe Rabbeinu assumed a persona - history’s archetypal Jewish leader, the quintessential tzaddik. Indeed, the Zohar HaKadosh teaches that Moshe Rabbeinu’s spirit extends throughout the generations; each leader of the Jewish nation contains within his heart a spark of our first redeemer’s mighty soul. With this in mind, the *Degel* teaches that Moshe’s introduction to the account of his prayers in fact contains a prayer itself - the prayer of each and every Jewish leader throughout our glorious history. What is that prayer? “*Va’eschanan el Hashem*” - the deepest prayer of the tzaddikim is: “*ba’eis ha’hi leimor*” - “Please Hashem, let my teachings be relevant to the spirit of the times and the issues that affect the generation in my care. Let me not simply echo the teachings of the generations past; let me build on those foundations and extract the gems from the vast corpus of our tradition to present a vision of the Jewish enterprise that is meaningful “*ba’eis hahi*”, in the context of the unique times in which we are living.”

We live in the Age of Information. Never before has so much knowledge been as accessible to humankind, literally sitting at our fingertips - it is truly a wonder! But somehow, the abundance in quantity has also marked a dearth of quality. Rare is the content that speaks to us rather than at us, that can truly enter the heart and transform the mind. Now more than ever, our leaders must remember the tefillah of Moshe Rabbeinu and beg Hashem for the Divine assistance that will enable them to nurture our exalted nation with teachings that truly speak to the soul of our generation.

Friends, the book you hold in your hand is filled with the fire of Yiddishkeit that dances within the heart of its remarkable author, R’ Kyle Zaldin. Indeed, its pages drip with a special blend of Kyle’s own insight and the wisdom of Jewish sages from across the wonderful spectrum of our nation. But above all, “Opening Lines” represents the answer to a heartfelt prayer of a young Jewish leader from Toronto, Canada: “*Ba’eis ha’hi leimor*”. Above all else, the primary feature of the teachings, chiddushim, concepts, and ideals in this wonderful sefer is their incredible relevance to our wondrous

generation, a nation desperately thirsting for a Torah of sweetness and warmth, a Torah of depth and life, a Torah to hold on to.

With his passion, excitement, ingenuity, and deep connection with the spark of Moshe Rabbeinu he holds within, R' Kyle is a rising star in the world of Jewish education who will undoubtedly illuminate many thousands of hearts and homes across the globe. Our prayer is that Hashem will continue to answer his request, filling his soul with the confidence and courage to pave a way of relevance, truth, and illumination in what can sometimes seem to be a meaningless, deceitful, and dark world.

With admiration, love, and excitement for this and future projects,
Yaakov Klein
21 MarCheshvan, 5781 (*Thei Shnas Ahavas P'nimiyus*)
Yerushalayim Ir HaKodesh

Haskamos

”ה' יזכה אותך שתעשה רצונו בשלמות לעלות נפשך ונפשות אחרים, ולכתוב רק דברים אמיתיים וישרים
המועילים לך ולזולתך.”
הרב איתמר שוורץ שליט”א
מחבר ספרי “בלבבי משכן אבנה”

“What an accomplishment, so impressive. Kol ha’kavod!”



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“It has been and continues to be a true honour for me to have a relationship with Kyle Zaldin and to recommend the kuntrus of his chiddushim in Torah. Kyle’s efforts as he starts his life as an observant Jew and budding torah scholar are clearly evident in the beauty of his Torah explorations as sampled in this book. I look forward to seeing great things from Kyle, of which this book is just the starting point. Read what he wrote and I am sure you will also anticipate great things from this young man.”

Rabbi Avram Rothman

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***In loving memory of
my grandmother, Edie
Goldstein a"h, Chaya
Tzippah bas Moshe***

*In honour of the
Lubavitcher Rebbe zya,
Rabbi Menachem Mendel
Schneerson.*

*He taught us how to see every task in life
as an opportunity to fulfill our divine
mission in this world.*

**In honour of Rabbi
Noach Weinberg ztl,
the founder and
Rosh Yeshiva of
Aish HaTorah.**

**He taught us that we are
responsible for the entire
world.**

***In loving memory of my
great aunt, Bernice
Goldstein a"h, Bayla bas
Shimon.***

Foreword	1
Haskamos	3
Introduction	8
Bereishis: Prerequisites for Mitzvos	9
Noach: Righteous in his and every generation	10
Lech Lecha: Faith, Revelation, and Responsibility	13
Vayera: Chesed and Eretz Yisrael	17
Chayei Sarah: Nisyonos with love	19
Toldos: Parental Connection	22
Vayitzei: A Couple of Questions and a Powerful Lesson	25
Vayishlach: We Do Not Rely on Miracles	27
Vayeishev: What does it mean to convert?	29
Mikeitz: Intertwined with Chanukah to teach us one message	32
Vayigash: Yehudah's Message To Us	35
Vayechi: Becoming A Leader	37
Shemos: Past, Present, and Future	39
Vaera: Extra words?	41
Bo: Hashem helps actualize our thoughts and feelings	43
Beshalach: Fences and Action	45
Yisro: Fulfilling our Potential	47
Mishpatim: The Purpose of Torah Law	50
Terumah: The Purpose of the Mishkan	52
Tetzaveh: Hishtadlus and the Menorah	54

Ki Tisa: Machatzis HaShekel- A tool for connection	56
Vayakhel: The Meaning of Shabbos	58
Pekudei: A Temporary Dwelling	61
Vayikra: Hashem is Calling Out to You	63
Tzav: The importance of Emotional Connection	65
Shemini: Eating and Leadership!?	68
Tazria: Hashem Needs Mankind	70
Metzora: The Severity of Lashon HaRa	72
Acharei Mos: Running and Returning	74
Kedoshim: Different than all the Rest	76
Emor: Leading with Inspiration and Education	79
Behar: Joy from Hardship	81
Bechukosai: The Thought that Counts	83
Bamidbar: Ultimately a Love Story	85
Naso: We Have Infinite Potential	87
Behaalosecha: The Power of Desire	89
Shelach: The Gravity of the Sin of the Spies and its Connection to the Sin of Miriam	91
Korach: Seeing Clearly	94
Chukas: Faith Above All	97
Balak: The Power of Torah and Tefillah	99
Pinchas: Personal Prayer- Praying for Action	101
Matos: Clarity- Seeing Hashem in the “Bad”	104
Maasei: Everywhere You Go, Hashem is With You	106
Devarim: Mussar for our Generation	108

Va'eschanan: The Power and Purpose of Prayer	110
Eikev: Believing in Ourselves and in Judaism	112
Re'eh: The Power to Choose	115
Shoftim: Holding Ourselves Accountable	117
Ki Seitzei: Striking First	119
Ki Savo: Emunah Goes a Long Way	121
Nitzavim: Standing Together in Judgement	123
Vayeilech: The Power of the Individual and the Importance of Feeling Hashem	125
Ha'azinu: A Song to Heaven and Earth?	127
V'Zos HaBracha: The Power and Purpose of the Jewish People	129

Introduction

Rabbi Eliezer Papo, in his sefer the Pele Yoetz, says a fascinating thing¹! Each and every person can and should be *mechadesh*, that is to reveal and record new ideas, to the best of his or her abilities. According to the Pele Yoetz, being *mechadesh Chiddushei Torah* is defined as asking and answering questions raised in Tanach and Shas, meaning, providing explanations of *peshat* (the simple or literal meaning), *remez* (the alluded meaning), *drush* (the homiletical or interpretative meaning), and *sod* (the mystical or esoteric meaning) of Torah she'Be'al Peh (the oral Torah) and Torah She'B'Ksav (the written Torah). The Pele Yoetz also details that those who cannot come up with *chiddushim* of their own, can study the *chiddushim* of others. He explains that when you learn something that you did not know before, it is considered as if you were *mechadesh* it yourself.

With that short introduction, I can now proudly state that this is a book full of *chiddushim*. Opening Lines, a compilation of short *divrei torah* on the first pasuk (or two) of each parsha began as a WhatsApp group shortly after Simchas Torah 5780 (5780). In turn, with the onset of COVID-19 and the global shutdown that occurred, these *divrei torah* were compiled into a small book. As a *baal teshuvah*, very much involved in Aish HaTorah and NCSY, I know that I have the privilege to learn and understand small portions of the vast wisdom contained within Jewish tradition and thought. I also recognize that I have the incredible opportunity and responsibility to share the Torah that I learn with anyone who is willing to listen. In this book and throughout my life, my goal is to impart *emunah* and a knowledge of true, authentic *Yiddishkeit* to my friends, family, and those that listen to me and read what I write.

My hope and prayer is that you, the reader that has picked up this little collection of thoughts, will gain a few insights into the depth of Torah wisdom. May this small book be a catalyst for further learning, growth, contemplation, and internalization.

Kyle Zaldin
Toronto, Canada
5 Tishrei 5781/ September 23, 2020

¹ Pele Yoetz, Chapter 120

Bereishis: Prerequisites for Mitzvos

“בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:”

In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth.²

Rashi³ brings a comment of Rabbi Yitzchak who said: The Torah which is *Toras Chaim*, a living Torah, a blueprint for life, an eternal book relevant in every generation, should have begun with the mitzvah of setting the calendar, of establishing Rosh Chodesh, the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people⁴. It seems that Bereishis, Genesis, is simply a list of ancient stories, a history book of the beginning of the world. That is simply not the case! Rashi explains based on a pasuk in Tehillim⁵, that Hashem included the story of creation, of our forefathers, of Moshe Rabbeinu's ascent to leadership, in order to show the nations of the world that we are rooted in the past. As the Yalkut Shimoni⁶ explains, if the peoples of the world say to the Jewish people, “You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan”, Israel may reply to them, “All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed He gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us.”

The Mishnah⁷ in Pirkei Avos teaches us that there are three middos that drive a person from this world, jealousy, lust and honour. These are simply categories under which many character traits tend to fall. Each of them is represented in Bereishis. Rav Chaim Vital, the primary student of the Arizal, taught that *middos*, character traits, are not among the 613 mitzvos because they are a prerequisite for mitzvah observance⁸. Without clarifying our purpose in life⁹, without knowing who we are¹⁰, without purifying ourselves, fixing our character traits that need a little fine-tuning, Torah is simply not going to work within us. It will not accomplish what it was designed to do. Therefore, explains Rashi, the Torah began with Bereishis, with stories about our past, to teach us that we are children of G-d, that Hashem created us for a reason, that we can strive to be like our ancestors.

² Bereishis 1:1

³ Rashi on Bereishis, 1:1, בְּרֵאשִׁית

⁴ Shemos 12:2

⁵ Tehillim 111:6

⁶ Yalkut Shimoni, *remez* 187

⁷ Avos 4:21

⁸ Shaarei Kedushah, Part 1, Shaar 2

⁹ See Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh, Part 1

¹⁰ See Derech HaMelech, Shvi'i Shel Pesach

Noach: Righteous in his and every generation

”אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ־נֹחַ:”,
This is the lineage of Noach. Noach was a righteous man; he was simple and righteous in his generation; With G-d, Noach walked.¹¹

There’s so much to unpack from this opening *pasuk*. First and foremost, we must address why the Torah states that this is the line of Noach, and does not go on to name his children or actual lineage. Rashi¹², in his commentary, explains based on a Midrash in Bereishis Rabbah¹³ that since after stating “This is the line of Noach”, it does not mention the names of his children but rather declares that he “was a righteous man”, the Torah teaches that the real lineage of righteous people are their good deeds.

Rashi¹⁴ also comments on the seemingly superfluous words in the verse “צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו”, he was righteous even in his generation. Rashi explains a *machlokes* in Chazal. One opinion is that this verse praises Noach, had he lived in a generation of righteous people he would have been even more righteous. Others, however, explain it to his discredit: in comparison with his own generation, he was righteous but had he lived in the generation of Avraham he would have been nothing, an “average Joe” with no importance whatsoever. This *machlokes* is explained clearly in the Talmud¹⁵, which records an argument between Rav Yochanan and Reish Lakish.

The Alter of Novardok, Rabbi Yosef Yozel Horwitz, a student of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter and a leader of the mussar movement offers the following interpretation. This insight is not *pschat*, the simple interpretation, however, the message is certainly worth learning and reflecting on. The Alter of Novardok interprets as follows¹⁶: The reason Noach was a tzadik was that he saw what happened to the rest of his generation. Noach was in a situation where the world around him was so corrupt and so immersed in

¹¹ Bereishis 6:9

¹² Rashi on Bereishis, 6:9, “אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק”

¹³ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 30:6

¹⁴ Rashi on Bereishis, 6:9, “בְּדֹרֹתָיו”

¹⁵ Maseches Sanhedrin, 108a

¹⁶ Madregat Ha’adam, page 7

(Written during World War I, this interpretation and *mashal* fits in with the struggles of the world and the Jewish community at the time.)

immorality. The fact that the society around him was so wicked and depraved was his inspiration to grow, to rise above and become better.

The Alter of Novardok writes that our sages do not disagree regarding the fact that Noah was righteous, nor is it their intention to compare Noah's righteousness with the greatness of Avraham Avinu (or any of our other righteous ancestors for that matter). Rather, Chazal's disagreement is regarding what motivated Noah. One view, the opinion of Reish Lakish, says that Noah searched for the truth, and therefore he was righteous. His surroundings did not define him. If Noah believed in Hashem, and found truth and justice in his generation, how much more certain it is that he would have found the truth in Avraham's generation! No matter what generation he lived in, Noah would have been a *tzadik*, and maybe even the leader of that generation. The other view, the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan, contends that Noah was motivated to be righteous only because he was repulsed by the immorality he was surrounded by. Their wickedness forced Noah to take a stand, so-to-speak. Had he lived in Avraham's time, when immorality was not so prevalent, Noah would not have taken that kind of leadership to be the *tzadik* of his generation. In Avraham's generation, Noah would have remained indifferent.

According to the Alter of Novardok, those who expound the phrase "צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו" negatively, as summarized by Rashi, are saying that had Noah lived in a generation like that of Avraham Avinu where society was not so corrupt, Noah would have been an "average Joe". He would not have had sufficient motivation to separate himself from the behaviour of those around him. Noah would have followed the way everyone else was living, happy to be just like his neighbours.

The Alter explains further with a *mashal*, a parable. A passenger rode in the first class compartment of a train. But that alone was not an indication of whether he is a wealthy person. In wartime, one may ride first class simply because he has no other choice. The cheaper coaches are filled, transporting soldiers and refugees who are packed into the train's coaches. On the other hand, if one rides first class in peace-time, when there are plenty of seats in the cheaper coaches, that is an indication that one has money to spend. Similarly, it is undisputed that Noah was objectively righteous; in other words, that he "rode first class." What our sages question, however, is whether he "rode first class" because there were no more cheaper seats available and he wanted to avoid the other passengers, or because that is where he truly wanted to sit.

The interpretation of the Alter of Novardok is teaching us a valuable lesson. Even when doing *mitzvos*, when we act in the appropriate manner, we must ask ourselves if we are acting based on our own desire to do good, or if we are simply trying to avoid the evil of the masses.

There is a clear precedent in the Talmud¹⁷ that one should still study, learn, and fulfill mitzvos without the proper motivation, maybe even for ulterior motives, as through the performance of mitzvos not for their own sake, one will come in the end to do them for their own sake. This is further codified by the Rambam¹⁸. While there is much to say on the topic, this can be summed up rather nicely by Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin in his book, where he writes: “Religious integrity is not determined by the door you enter or even the length of which you stay. Our momentary religious experiences are meaningful regardless of their motivations or durations,”¹⁹. While ultimately, the goal of our Torah learning and fulfillment of *mitzvos* is to “do good”, to forge a relationship with G-d²⁰, to act of our own desire to connect with Hashem, the first verse of Parshas Noach teaches that regardless of whether we are focused “doing good” or simply are attempting to “run away from evil”²¹, both have meaning and significance.

¹⁷ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Arachin, 16b; Talmud Bavli, Maseches Pesachim, 50b; Talmud Bavli, Maseches Sotah 22b; Talmud Bavli, Maseches Horayos, 10b

¹⁸ Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Talmud Torah, 3:5

¹⁹ Sin•a•gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought, Case Studies in Sin and Failure, pg. 120

²⁰ As taught in the sefarim of Rav Itamar Schwartz, Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh

²¹ Based on Tehillim 34:15

Lech Lecha: Faith, Revelation, and Responsibility

"וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלֶדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶךָ:"
G-d said to Avram, "Go from your native land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you."²²

The Gemara teaches: "If someone says: 'I have worked hard but I have not been successful,' don't believe him. If someone says: 'I have not worked hard and I have been successful,' don't believe him. If someone says: 'I have worked hard and I have been successful,' believe him!"²³. Rashi²⁴ comments that this passage is referring to Torah study. However, it is true of all aspects of life²⁵. As we learn countless times throughout Tanach, from the beginning of the Torah in Parshas Bereishis to Sefer Iyov, the book of Job, man was created to work hard. Hashem is good and wishes to give us good things. However, He wants us to earn what we have. After all, we will feel much more fulfilled if we know we have worked hard and deserve a reward. This is a lesson many of us need to learn: True success, therefore, comes only if a person has worked hard. We cannot hope to never fail; that is impossible. What we can do is continue to rise every time we fall, which will guarantee us success. As Shlomo HaMelech said in Mishlei²⁶, "שבע יפול צדיק וקם", "The righteous falls seven times and rises [again]."

In Pirkei Avos, Ethics of Our Fathers, it is said that G-d tested Avraham Avinu with ten tests and he withstood all of them²⁷. But the Mishnah does not tell us what those tests were.

Our sages do not all agree and bring their own list of what Avraham's ten tests were. The entirety of the Rambam's list can be found clearly in the Torah²⁸. Most other lists include events that are recorded only in the Midrash. For example, the list brought by Rabbi Ovadiah of Bertinoro, commonly known as "The Bartenura"²⁹, begins with Avraham being thrown into a fiery furnace, an event that is not recorded in the Torah,

²² Bereishis 12:1

²³ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Megillah, 6b

²⁴ Rashi on Megillah 6b, 3:1, "יגעת"

²⁵ Based on Likkutei Ma'amarim, Chodshim u'Moadim, 1:1 where this Gemara is quoted in a general context

²⁶ Mishlei 24:16

²⁷ Pirkei Avos, 5:3.

²⁸ Rambam on Pirkei Avos, 5:3

²⁹ Bartenura on Pirkei Avos, 5:3

but is known to us only by way of the Midrash³⁰. (There are many other lists of the ten tests Avraham faced, found in various places throughout Chazal, such as in the Midrash Tehillim³¹, Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer³², Avos d'Rabbi Natan³³, and many others.)

Parshas Lech Lecha opens with Avraham's first test according to the Rambam, and the first test recorded in the Torah according to all opinions, who record this as one of the ten trials Avraham was given.

The Midrash Tanchuma³⁴ comments on the words, "To the land which I will show you". At this point, Hashem did not designate a specific place. This is a trial within a trial; would Avraham go without knowing where he was going? Avram passed this double test, as he immediately took all that he had, and went as Hashem had told him. This is the essential example of *emunah*. From his first encounter with G-d, Avraham had complete and total faith in Hashem.

Another interesting point in this *pasuk* are the words "לך-לך". Hashem appears to Avraham and says: "Go for yourself". This seemingly superfluous wording is usually just explained away as G-d telling Avraham that in order to reach the land that I will show you, you must go for yourself; meaning, in order to grow, you must distance yourself from your country, from your relatives, and from your father's house. Some expound on this further, such as the Biala (Yerushalayim-Tzfas-Lugano) Rebbe, Rabbi Ben-Tzion Rabinowitz, in Mevasser Tov: "When Avraham left his father's home, he began a spiritual journey of self-discovery, to 'forget his nation and his father's house,' and cleanse himself of the corruptive influences to which he had been exposed in his youth. Only then would he be able to absorb the holiness of Eretz Yisrael,"³⁵.

The Nesivos Shalom³⁶, the previous Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, brings a different answer. It's written in the Midrash³⁷ that Rav Levi, a third-century Amora, said: Twice the Torah uses the phrase Lech-Lecha. For it is stated "אַל אֶרֶץ הַמּוֹרִיָּה", to Har HaMoriah (the Temple Mount). We can discern that the second time the Torah uses this phrase is more precious.

³⁰ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 38:13

³¹ Midrash Tehillim, Perek 18 and Perek 95 (Two lists are cited)

³² Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Perakim 26-31

³³ Avos d'Rabbi Natan, 33

³⁴ Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha 3:4

³⁵ Mevasser Tov on the Torah (English-5771), Parshas Lech Lecha, pg. 19

³⁶ Nesivos Shalom Al HaTorah, Parshas Lech Lecha, Maamar One, "לך-לך"

³⁷ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 39:9

Here, Rav Levi compares two great tests of Avraham Avinu, the command to leave his previous life at the beginning of our parsha, and the command to journey to Har HaMoriah for the *Akeidah*, the command to sacrifice his favourite and “only”³⁸ son in next week’s parsha, both of which incorporate the phrase “Lech Lecha,” meaning “go for yourself.” The comparison is perplexing. The *Akeidah*, the command to undertake a physically straining journey culminating in the sacrifice of Yitzchak, is way more difficult than even giving up one’s own life, let alone simply escaping the idol worship of one’s surroundings and following blindly in the path of the Creator of the Universe. Avraham was seized with a love for Yitzchak that encompassed all the love that is available on earth. How can there be any doubt as to which *nisayon* was more precious to Hashem?

Rabbi Avraham of Slonim, the first Slonimer rebbe, in his sefer the Yesod Ha’Avodah, cites the Ari HaKadosh, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, commonly known as the Arizal, as stating that no two people who ever lived had quite the same purpose and task. No person can ever accomplish what a second person was meant to contribute to the perfection of the universe, which was the purpose of his descent to this world. Each person is placed in precisely the circumstances he needs to fulfill that mission. Everything in life, even the challenges and struggles, is part of a divine mission, uniquely designed for that person’s individual mission and task. All the *nisyonos*, all the tests that are put in our paths, these trials and tribulations, are “for your good, for your benefit”³⁹.

This is the key to understanding the opening *pasuk* of the parsha: “לך-לך”. Go – on your individual journey of personal betterment and spiritual growth. Hashem’s command to Avraham repeats itself to each and every one of us. We must overcome the conditions that we are challenged with, that will ultimately shape who we are, if we do not do anything about them. The command “Lech Lecha”, which our *tzadikim* have defined as “go for your own good,” is the motto we should live our lives by. If we are to achieve our purpose in life, we must escape the limitations of the conditions with which we begin our journey, forging our own path.

We can now begin to understand the question posed by Rav Levi. In life, there are two different types of *nisyonos*. The first is the constant battle against our inner nature and external conditions. This is the *nisayon* of the “*lech lecha*” in our parsha. The other kind is far more difficult; it presents itself only once. It is the turning point in a person’s life. The type of challenge where they either overcome and continue to grow, or succumb

³⁸ Bereishis 22:2 (The Torah uses the word “יחיד” and this needs further explanation)

³⁹ Rashi on Bereishis, 12:1 “לך לך”

to and it ultimately destroys then. This is the “*lech lecha*” of the *Akeidah*. The most difficult of all *nisyonos*.

Although Rav Levi concludes based on the words “אֶל אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה”, to Har HaMoriah, that in fact the second time, the *Akeidah*, is more precious to Hashem, it still required some thinking. At first glance, it should be obvious which was the more severe test. However, the Midrash ultimately teaches that overcoming the *nisyonos* of everyday life is just as important as overcoming the life-altering monumental tests.

Vayera: Chesed and Eretz Yisrael

"וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵלֶיךָ מִמְרָא וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח-הָאֹהֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם"

Hashem appeared to him by the plains of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.⁴⁰

Rashi⁴¹, in his commentary, writes that Avraham Avinu was sitting at the entrance to his tent to see whether anyone passed by, so he could invite them into his home. After going through the pain of *bris milah* at ninety-nine years old, three days later, while in excruciating pain Avraham was ready to fulfill the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim*. The Navi⁴² explains that Avraham is the paradigm of the *middah* of *chesed*. Although *chesed* is often translated as lovingkindness and simply thought of as synonymous with niceness, the connotation of *chesed* is much deeper than this. *Chesed* is more accurately described as an act that has no "cause."

It is said in the name of the Vilna Gaon that when one wants to know what a *sefer* is about, one reads the first page and the last page, and then one knows the goal and objective for the *sefer*. The Talmud⁴³ relates that the Torah starts with *chesed*, when Hashem clothed Adam and Chavah, and it ends with *chesed*, when He buried Moshe⁴⁴. Since the beginning and end of the Torah is *gemilus chasadim*, this shows us that the essence of the Torah is *gemilus chasadim*. It is no wonder that Avraham Avinu, who as our sages teach us⁴⁵, recognized the Creator of the Universe at the age of three, and dedicated his whole life to spreading the knowledge of G-d, was the paradigm of *chesed*.

The following *vort*⁴⁶ was told over by the famous *mashpia* Rabbi Elimelech Biderman. Each morning, following Birchos HaTorah we recite the Mishnah in Pe'ah: "אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פירותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא", "These are the matters that one eats the fruits of the reward in this world, while the main reward is stored for Olam Haba" The Mishnah⁴⁷ then goes on to list several examples of *chesed*. One of the questions our sages have raised with this Mishnah is: why is *chesed* rewarded in this

⁴⁰ Bereishis 18:1

⁴¹ Rashi on Bereishis, 18:1, "פתח האהל"

⁴² Michah 20:7

⁴³ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Sotah, 14a

⁴⁴ (Not only is burying the dead considered a *chesed*, it is the "*chesed shel emes*," "the true act of kindness.")

⁴⁵ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Nedarim, 32a

⁴⁶ Torah Wellsprings, 5778, Shavuot

⁴⁷ Mishnah, Peah 1:1

world? The Rosh⁴⁸ explains that "Hakadosh Baruch Hu desires more the *mitzvos* when one is helping his fellow man, than when the *mitzvos* that are solely for Him."

It is brought down in many siddurim, based on the practice of the Arizal, that before davening, it is proper to recite the statement: I hereby take upon myself the mitzvah of "love your fellow as yourself, *וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָמוֹךָ*, הרניי מקבל עלי מצות עשה של ואהבת לרעך כמוך. For a Jew to approach his Creator, he must first accept the mitzvah of *Ahavas Yisrael*.

Besides for the *machloksim*, the conflicts, between *Ashkenazim* and *Sephardim*, *Chassidim* and *Misnagdim*, *Dati Leumi* and *Chareidim*, which are all superficial at best and legitimate strifes that can be reconciled at worst, we have an even serious threat to our unity as a people. This is the threat of Jewish organizations that actively oppose the State of Israel, aligning themselves with those who seek to destroy us. *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, is the homeland of the Jewish people, promised to us by Hashem Himself⁴⁹ in Parshas Lech Lecha. Open any section of Tanach and you would be hard-pressed not to find a prophetic vision of Zion or laws pertaining to the *mitzvos* of *Eretz Yisrael*. The attempts to erase any historic and religious significance of Judaism in the region is shocking and unfathomable.

The first step to *gemillus chasadim* is *achdus*, unity. The first step to unity is mutual understanding, an understanding of who we are as a people and where we belong. This is why Avraham Avinu, the paradigm of *chesed*, began his spiritual journey with the command of "Lech Lecha", the command to leave his past behind and to journey to the Land of Israel. Even before having his *bris milah*, what we know is the basic entrance ticket into the covenant with Hashem, he had to go to *Eretz Yisrael*, to experience the *kedushah* of the land for Himself, to feel the intense yearning for Hashem and the love for every Jew and every person that is uniquely felt there. Only then could Avraham Avinu begin to comprehend the incomprehensible awesomeness of G-d, and as our sages teach⁵⁰ begin to emulate his ways.

⁴⁸ Rash MiShantz on Mishnah, Peah 1:1,

⁴⁹ Bereishis 15: 18

⁵⁰ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Sotah, 14a

Chayei Sarah: Nisyonos with love

"וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:"

Sarah's lifetime, the span of Sarah's life, came to one hundred and twenty and seven years.⁵¹

In the first pasuk of Chayei Sarah, there is a double *lashon*, seemingly superfluous wording. Rashi⁵² explains that the message of these repetitive phrases is to teach us that all of the years of Sarah's life were equally good. Yet, this is a little difficult to comprehend. How is it possible to say this about Sarah's life? For many years she was childless; she experienced famine and exile; she was taken captive by the Pharaoh of Egypt and later by Avimelech. To this, the Chizkuni⁵³ translates Rashi's commentary, explaining that the apparent superfluous words: "the years of," mean that Sarah retained all her virtues in equal measure throughout her life.

A story is told that once, the Yesod HaAvodah, Rabbi Avraham Weinberg of Slonim, spoke about this Rashi with great enthusiasm, until everyone present was extremely inspired together with him. He then shouted with all his might, "life was always good for her." She was always happy and satisfied with her life⁵⁴.

The first word of the parashah, "ויהיו", can be read forwards and backwards. The Chida⁵⁵ teaches, "ויהיו חיי שרה" means that regardless of whether her life was going in the 'right' direction, or whether her life seemed to be going in a backwards manner, she always viewed her life as being very good. Even with the struggles she was faced with, her own challenges as well as being a partner in the *nisyonos* of Avraham Avinu, she was aware that every situation in her life was a gift from Hashem. Therefore she was able to evaluate them as positive.

This is an important lesson for every Jew. Happiness, joy, and one's quality of life is not dependent on external situations. The wealthiest fashion designers, television personalities, and business executives are miserable, desperate to leave this world of "hardships and suffering". They tend to evaluate minor frustrations as tragedies, and therefore view their lives in negative terms. The Torah ideal is to be aware that the

⁵¹ Bereishis 23:1

⁵² Rashi on Bereishis, 23:1, שני חיי שרה

⁵³ Chizkuni on Bereishis, 23:1, שני חיי שרה

⁵⁴ Torah Wellsprings, 5777, Parshas Chayei Sarah

⁵⁵ Chomas Anach al HaTorah, Bereishis 23:1, ויהיו חיי שרה

purpose of life is to bring Hashem into this world by perfecting ourselves. As Rebbitzen Dena Weinberg teaches, in life “there are no problems, only opportunities for growth.” At the end of Sarah’s life, which was constantly devoted to growth, it could be said about her that *all* her years were good. In each difficult situation, she was able to ask herself, “How can I become a better person because of what happened?”

In the opening *pasuk*, we are informed that Sarah died at the age of 127. But we are really told a great deal more than that. Firstly, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in accordance with our *tzadikim*, explains that the life of a tzaddik is more vital after death, when the merits of her deeds are fulfilled and actualized⁵⁶. That is why, the Rebbe explains, this week’s parsha is called “Chaye Sarah”, the “life of Sarah”. Although Chazal bring down the greatness of Sarah in her lifetime, it was only after her death that the Torah truly describes her greatness for what it was. *Sarah Immenu* invested her very essence into her son, working hard to keep her home pure and holy. Although the Torah describes what happens after the death of Sarah, when we read later on in this week’s parsha that Yitzchak married Rivka and together they continued in her ways, the Torah describes the life of Sarah so to speak.

With this in mind, in this passage, the Torah tells us just what kind of a woman Sarah was. Rashi comments⁵⁷, based on the Midrash⁵⁸, that when Sarah was one hundred years old, she was like a twenty-year-old regarding sin (It is brought down in the Gemara⁵⁹ that until the age of twenty, one is not held responsible for one's actions.) Therefore, Rashi explains, Sarah was clean of all sin at one hundred years of age, and when she was twenty years old, she was like a seven-year-old regarding beauty.

As well, each one of these ages, one hundred, twenty, and seven, has something unique about it. The seven-year-old has innocence; the twenty-year-old has strength; the one hundred-year-old has wisdom. Rav Joseph B. (Yosef Dov) Soloveitchik explains that most people pass from one stage of their lives to the next, leaving the previous stage behind, perhaps taking with them some fond memories. Based on the Rashi that “all of Sarah's years were equal” Rav Soloveitchik explains that the secret of the greatness of Sarah was that throughout her entire life she was one hundred, twenty, and seven, at the same time. At every point in her life, she remained the same. She was always as innocent as a seven-year-old, with the strength, determination and idealism of a twenty-year-old, and always possessed the wisdom of a one hundred-year-old.

⁵⁶ Likkutei Sichos, Vol. VI, Bereishis 23:1-25:18, Parshas Chaye Sarah

⁵⁷ Rashi on Bereishis, 23:1 יִהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעָה שָׁנִים

⁵⁸ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 58:1

⁵⁹ Talmud Bavli, Shabbos, 89b

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, “it is difficult to feel depressed when you remember fairly constantly that life is a gift,”⁶⁰. We all have been given that gift. We all have a choice to make. We can either be bitter and/or disregard the challenges that have plagued our lives, or we can choose to take every struggle that has come our way with joy and appreciation. We can either run from our past or face it head on. In life, there are times where it’s easy to see the immediate suffering and just give up, but we must persevere. The Torah teaches us that we have to look beyond our current situations, to open our eyes and to see where we ultimately want to end up at the end of our time in this world. Each and every one of us can be like Sarah. We just have to make the choice.

⁶⁰ Celebrating Life, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, page 8

Toldos: Parental Connection

"וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֵי יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם אֲבִרְהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת־יִצְחָק:"

This is the story of Yitzchak, son of Avraham. Avraham begat Isaac.⁶¹

There is again another seemingly superfluous phrase in the opening line of the parsha. The first *pasuk* in Parshas Toldos states both that Yitzchak was Avraham's son, and Avraham was Yitzchak's father. The Torah, which doesn't waste words, is clearly teaching us something. The only question is, what is the Torah trying to teach us? The Sforno⁶² comments that "וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֵי יִצְחָק" refers to Yitzchak's biography and his descendants, Yaakov and Eisav. From the words "אֲבִרְהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת יִצְחָק", we can learn that although Avraham had Yishmael and other children with his *pilagshim*, or concubines, only Yitzchak is truly called Avraham's seed.

Rashi explains⁶³, based on a Midrash⁶⁴ that the cynics of that time were skeptical of the paternity of Yitzchak, since Avraham was of advanced age. They believed that instead, Sarah became pregnant with the child of Avimelech. Therefore, Hashem shaped Yitzchak's facial features exactly similar to those of Avraham's, so everyone had to admit that Avraham begat Yitzchak. There are a lot of interpretations of this perplexing Rashi, but one, in particular, stands out; the opinion of the Nachalas Yaakov as quoted by the Sifsei Chachamim⁶⁵. Parshas Toldos, discusses Yaakov and Eisav, one of whom was righteous, and the other, wicked. Why then does the opening *pasuk* describe the paternity of Avraham Avinu? The cynics of the generations claimed for years, since the time of Yitzchak's birth, that Sarah was impregnated by Avimelech. However, there was nothing to substantiate that claim. Now, when Yitzchak fathered twins, one a *tzaddik* and one a *rasha*, they had found support for their claim.

The Nachalas Yaakov, quoted by the Sifsei Chachamim explains that Rashi taught that our parsha begins with the continuation of a story earlier in Chumash, which is why the *pasuk* begins with "וְאֵלֶּה", "And these...". It is also why it is necessary to doubly state that not only was Avraham Yitzchak's father, but that Yitzchak resembled his father in every way, specifically in appearance, though he had a son that did not follow in the

⁶¹ Bereishis 25:19

⁶² Sforno on Bereishis, 25:19

⁶³ Rashi on Bereishis, 25:19, אֲבִרְהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת יִצְחָק

⁶⁴ Midrash Tanchuma, Toldos 3

⁶⁵ Sifsei Chachaim, Bereishis, 25:19, 2

ways of his father, Yitzchak was still righteous, the son of a righteous person, Avraham Avinu.

This is not such a radical reading of Rashi's commentary. Our sages, as delineated by the Ramban who quotes a Midrash⁶⁶, teaches that the purpose of showcasing the actions of the *avos* is to demonstrate that any action, small as it may be, channels a divine decree creating and enabling abilities in future generations. This is known as the principle of *מעשה אבות סימן לבנים*. This is generally translated as meaning that the actions of the forefathers are a symbol or sign for their descendants. Various ancient and contemporary scholars argue that the life of Moshe Rabeinu adheres to this principle, as it is based in the Genesis story. The burning bush and Moshe's answer of "הנני", witnessing fights and slaying a fellow man, fleeing from his home; there are some striking similarities.

Now, a new question is raised. How is it then that the life of Eisav seems to go in a completely different path from the characters of the Chumash, particularly Yishmael, who also did not succeed his father and continue his legacy.

Rashi⁶⁷, famously quotes a Midrash⁶⁸, which states that the twins, Yaakov and Eisav struggled inside of their mother Rivka, because they tried to "escape" when they passed their respective places of worship. Whenever Rivka passed by the *yeshivos* of Shem and Ever, Yaakov moved erratically in his efforts to come to birth, but whenever she passed by the gate of a pagan temple Eisav moved around, desperately trying to be born. Whether literal or metaphorical, this Midrash carries the same meaning. While inside the womb, Yaakov and Eisav were already destined for completely different paths.

The Ran brings us back to the first Sforno we discussed, and elaborates on its message with an interesting *drasha*. Writes the Ran⁶⁹: Because of the strong bond between Yaakov and Eisav, as twins born to the same righteous mother, Rivka, they were both called "the descendants of Yitzchak". Even though Eisav was intermarried and an idol worshiper, he is still remembered as Yitzchak's son, unlike Yishmael, who is considered as a son when he buries his father together with Yitzchak⁷⁰, yet is not given the honour of being referred to as "the descendant of Avraham,"⁷¹ as Yitzchak is, for which we have explained it is added that "אברהם הוליד את יצחק", "Avraham begot

⁶⁶ Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha, 9

⁶⁷ Rashi on Bereishis, 25:22, ויתרצו

⁶⁸ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 63:6

⁶⁹ Darashos HaRan, 2:8

⁷⁰ Bereishis 25:6

⁷¹ Bereishis 21:10

Yitzchak." The Ran continues that the reason for this is that Yitzchak and Yishmael were not equal in Avraham's eyes. This was not the case, however, with Yaakov and Eisav with Yitzchak, to the point that Eisav had tricked his father into believing that it was him, not Yaakov, who would be the spiritual heir of monotheism.

This *drash* is beautiful, but I believe it is hinting at something even more profound. When a person is part of a family unit and accords his parents with love and respect, as Yaakov and Eisav faithfully did each in their own way, regardless of the sins of the individual or the hatred and fighting that may exist in part of the family, the family as a whole, and therefore each individual, are intertwined and connected in the chain of history. When one is connected to their parents, they are ultimately connected to HaShem and to their family, regardless of their actions.

Vayeitzei: A Couple of Questions and a Powerful Lesson

"וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעֵר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חֲרָנָה:"

Yaakov left Beer-Sheva and set out for Charan.⁷²

The Torah, a little while earlier, tells us that Rivka and Yitzchak commanded Yaakov to go to Lavan's house, and Yaakov listened to his parents and went.⁷³ The question here is clear. Why then does the Torah repeat that Yaakov left his house in Beer-Sheva and set out for Charan? Compounding this question is a seemingly unnecessary Rashi⁷⁴, on the words וַיֵּלֶךְ חֲרָנָה, to go to Charan. Rashi comments Yaakov left "לָלֶכֶת לְחָרָן", to go to Charan. The Torah specifically said that! Rashi is not adding anything. The Sifsei Chachamim⁷⁵, explains the Rashi as follows: The Torah seems to imply that Yaakov arrived in Charan. This is not the case, because in the next *pasuk* we are told Yaakov spent the night on Har HaMoriah. According to Rashi, the Torah is merely going back to explain Yaakov camped on Har HaMoriah, while travelling, on his way to Charan. Rashi explains, Yaakov "left in order to go to Charan", but he did not get there yet. The following events took place before his arrival in Charan. This explanation of the Rashi is the same as the Sforno, in his commentary on this strange repetition⁷⁶.

The Maharal of Prague, in his commentary on the Torah, the Gur Aryeh⁷⁷, based on several Midrashim and other places in Tanach, expounds on Rashi⁷⁸ to teach the principle that the exit or loss of a *tzaddik* makes an impression on the spiritual makeup of the area. How the Maharal does not attempt to answer the glaring question of the repetition is astounding, but it is possible that someone on such a *madreigah* understood the Rashi clearly, therefore seeing no question to be answered. In fact, no other major commentators pick apart and analyze this Rashi⁷⁹.

⁷² Bereishis 28:10

⁷³ Bereishis 28:2-7

⁷⁴ Rashi on Bereishis, 28:10, וַיֵּלֶךְ חֲרָנָה

⁷⁵ Sifsei Chachamim on Bereishis, 28:10

⁷⁶ Sforno on Bereishis, 28:10. וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב...וַיֵּלֶךְ חֲרָנָה

⁷⁷ Gur Aryeh on Bereishis, 28:10

⁷⁸ Rashi on Bereishis, 28:10, וַיֵּצֵא

⁷⁹ We have some food for thought, but it is not something to dwell on, as our sages did not even address this glaring question.

The Ben Ish Chai, quotes a Midrash that states that the words in Tehillim “אשא עיני אל ההרים, מאין יבוא עזרי? עזרי מעם ה' עושה שמיים וארץ”, “I lift my eyes to the mountains, from where will help come. My help comes from Hashem, creator of heaven and earth”⁸⁰, was said by Yaakov Avinu as he left Beer-Sheva on his journey to Charan. The Ben Ish Chai writes⁸¹: It seems to me that when Yaakov left Eretz Yisrael and fled from Eisav, Eliphaz attacked him and took all of his money. Yaakov arrived at Har HaMoriah at the lowest point of his life. There on the mountain of G-d, he was watched, guarded, and promised protection in a covenant with Hashem. After that, when he came back to Eretz Yisrael wealthy and with children, Lavan pursued him on Har Gila'ad and wished to uproot everything. It was also there on the mountain that Hashem helped Yaakov and saved him from evil. It is because of this, says the Ben Ish Chai that our holy sages say that Yaakov said the pasuk of “אשא עיני אל ההרים” on his way out of Beer-Sheva, for he foresaw the help of Hashem when he left the land and re-entered it, in his encounters on Har HaMoriah and Har Gila'ad.

This is a beautiful explanation of a possibly perplexing Midrash, but what is the Ben Ish Chai teaching us? Yaakov foresaw all the good in his life, his salvations and successes. However, he also must have foresaw the pain and suffering he would endure over the course of the journey he was about to embark on. Yet, Yaakov Avinu simply ignored that part. Yaakov focused only on the good and recognized that as he went on his journey from Beer-Sheva to Charan, he would survive and be aided only by Hashem, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth. So too, each and every one of us, as we go on our own journeys of discovery and change, we have to focus on the positive and recognize the everyday miracles that happen as a result of Hashem's kindness.

⁸⁰ Tehillim, 121:1

⁸¹ Ben Ish Chai, Drashot, Vayeitzei, 1

Vayishlach: We Do Not Rely on Miracles

"וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מַלְאָכִים לְפָנָיו אֶל־עֵשָׂו אֶחָיו אֶרְצָה שְׂעִיר שָׂדֶה אֲדוֹם:"

Yaakov sent “*melachim*” ahead to his brother Eisav in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.⁸²

There is a major *machlokes* in these seemingly simple words. Rashi holds⁸³ based on a Midrash⁸⁴ that Yaakov sent “מלאכים ממש”, literal angels. The Chizkuni does not agree with the Midrashic interpretation. The Chizkuni writes⁸⁵ that the word *melachim* here means, “Yaakov sent out messengers”, based on the Aramaic translations, which use the word אַזְגָּדִין, literally runners, or as we understand it, messengers. This is an interesting *machlokes*, but it is of little significance to us. The fact is, we know both Yaakov and Eisav were in tune with the spirituality that surrounded them. Whether they could interact with *melachim* or not is unimportant. The major takeaway, explains the Sforno⁸⁶, is that Yaakov, worried about his brother’s feelings towards him and state of mind at the time, sends angels/messengers to Seir to seek out information.

The Radak⁸⁷, in his commentary on the *pasuk*, writes that even though Hashem had assured Yaakov of His support twice, Yaakov was still afraid of his brother, Eisav. Yaakov knew that at the time he left home, Eisav was very angry at him and planned to kill him. He was now afraid that due to some sin he may have committed and had been unaware of, he might forfeit Hashem’s support. How can the Radak suggest that Yaakov Avinu did not fully believe in Hashem’s explicit promise? The answer can be found in the writings of Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, the Baal Haturim, in his full commentary on the Torah⁸⁸. He writes that the assignment of the messengers or angels was to walk in front of Yaakov and his family, to protect him and his family. Only after that was their assignment to investigate Eisav’s attitude towards his brother.

As we see in the first aliyah of Vayishlach, although Hashem had given Yaakov all kinds of assurances sometime earlier, Yaakov Avinu did not rely on his righteousness alone to save him from Eisav, but took every precaution to minimize the risk to his

⁸² Bereishis 32:4

⁸³ Rashi on Bereishis, 32:4, וישלח יעקב מלאכים

⁸⁴ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 75:4

⁸⁵ Chizkuni on Bereishis, 32:4

⁸⁶ Sforno on Bereishis, 32:4, וישלח יעקב מלאכים

⁸⁷ Radak on Bereishis, 32:4, וישלח יעקב מלאכים

⁸⁸ Tur Ha'Aroch on Bereishis, 32:4

family and to himself. In one of the most famous Rashis on Chumash, Rashi writes⁸⁹ the well-known words, “עִם לְבִן גֵּרְתִּי וְתַרְגִּי גִּמְצוֹת שְׁמִרְתִּי וְלֹא לְמַדְתִּי מִמַּעֲשֵׂי הָרָעִים”. Yaakov lived with Lavan, kept the whole Torah, and did not learn from Lavan’s evil ways. Yaakov Avinu, who kept all the mitzvos is clearly living the principle brought down all over Shas⁹⁰, of “אֵין סוֹמְכִין עַל הַנֶּסֶם”, one does not rely on miracles. Even though we believe in miracles and the reality that Hashem can override nature for a specific goal, according to Jewish thought, we should not ask for or rely on miracles that defy nature. In this case, when Eisav had a contingent of four hundred men with him⁹¹, Yaakov could not rely on his covenant with Hashe; he had to take all the necessary precautions.

Not only can this spectacular vindication of this principle brought down by our sages be extrapolated from the words of the Baal HaTurim, but his commentary continues. The Torah describes this event in such detail because Yaakov’s conduct, how he prepares to come face to face with his brother, serves as a model for his future descendants, the Jewish people. The actions of Yaakov Avinu teach us how to deal with the descendants of Eisav, those who try to uproot our way of life and destroy us physically, as well as spiritually. Says the Baal Haturim: just as Yaakov prayed, offered bribes, and was prepared for battle, so too we, his descendants must employ these and any other techniques we must to ensure our survival.

The Jews of Europe did not have an event like the Holocaust to teach them how easily the world could turn their backs on them. Today, since the Shoah, antisemitism, particularly hatred against visible Jews, has certainly not decreased. We know the famous phrase from the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos⁹², “אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי.”, “If I am not for myself, who is for me?” In this time of turmoil, confusion, and rabid anti-semitism, we have to be prepared to do whatever it takes to survive and thrive. Though the first step is faith and prayer, like Yaakov Avinu, we cannot rely solely on miracles. Everything is up to Hashem, but we must also do our *hishtadlus*, put in our best effort to keep ourselves safe.

⁸⁹ Rashi on Bereishis, 32:5, גרתי

⁹⁰ Talmud Bavli, Shabbos, 32a; Talmud Bavli, Taanis, 20b; Talmud Bavli, Pesachim, 64b; et. al

⁹¹ Bereishis 32:7

⁹² Pirkei Avos, 1:14

Vayeishev: What does it mean to convert?

"וַיָּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִגְרֵי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:"

“ Yaakov settled in the land where his father had lived, the land of Canaan.⁹³

The first point to address is the fact the Torah uses the word “וַיָּשֶׁב”, meaning “and he dwelt”, as opposed to “וַיֵּרָא”, meaning “and he lived” or something similar. On this, the Chizkuni⁹⁴ explains that Yaakov settled down, which is recorded parallel to Eisav settling down on Har Seir having been stated in the last parsha⁹⁵. After Eisav settled on what is now ancestral land for him⁹⁶, Yaakov is now described as having done something similar on the land promised by G-d to Avraham and his descendants. In the Gemara⁹⁷, Rabbi Yochanan states: Everywhere that it says “וַיָּשֶׁב”, it is nothing other than an expression of pain, of an impending calamity. One of the proofs he brings is this very pasuk, which is followed by “Yoseph [who] brought the evil report of them to his father⁹⁸”, which was one of the factors that led to his eventual sale.

Rashi, in his commentary⁹⁹, makes no mention of the impending calamity but instead states that the Torah uses the word “וַיָּשֶׁב” to teach that Yaakov requested calm and serenity after his interaction with Eisav and the end to his worries regarding his brother. What immediately follows is the tragic story of the sale and enslavement of Yosef. Our sages use this Rashi to teach the principle that in the life of a *tzadik* and in life in general, there is no smooth sailing. As soon as Yaakov Avinu thinks his troubles are over and settles down, pleading with Hashem for a little respite, his favourite son is taken from him at the young age of seventeen. Yaakov learns the hard way that in life, there are no shortcuts, no easy ways, to leading a moral and spiritually fulfilling life. In fact, we find that throughout Tanach, the leaders and most righteous of our people tend to battle with the toughest of *nisyonos*, and most fail to overcome all their struggles. To live a life without challenge is simply to be dead. Perhaps Rashi does not comment on

⁹³ Bereishis 37:1

⁹⁴ Chizkuni on Bereishis, 37:1, וַיָּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב

⁹⁵ Bereishis 36:8

⁹⁶ Yehoshua 24:3

⁹⁷ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Sanhedrin, 106a

⁹⁸ Bereishis 37:2

⁹⁹ Rashi on Bereishis, 37:1, וַיָּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב

the statement brought down in the Gemara by Rabbi Yochanan because his commentary understands that “וַיִּשָּׁב”, in the context used by the Torah of Yaakov settling down and pleading for respite, denotes the struggles and calamities that would occur shortly thereafter.

It is also worth mentioning the seemingly superfluous language of the Torah in describing the settlement as being in Eretz Canaan, as well as in the land where his father had lived. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov speaks about this in his magnum opus, *Likutei Moharan*, where he writes¹⁰⁰ that the explanation of this *pasuk*, based on a Midrash¹⁰¹, is that Yaakov made converts, as his father and grandfather had, as if it were written “*migiyyurei*”, from the converts, as opposed to “*megurei*”, from the dwelling place, of his father. This idea is developed further by Rebbe Nachman’s spiritual heir, Reb Nosson of Nemirov¹⁰², in his explanation of the fundamental differences between the characteristics of Yaakov and Eisav.

This is a beautiful explanation of this wording, but it overtly ignores Jewish tradition on the idea of conversion. We know that our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov converted people en masse. After all, they re-introduced the concept of monotheism to the world. However, we know that the Torah is *Toras Chaim*, the Torah of life, an instruction manual to how to live our lives as Jews until today. Judaism is not a proselytizing religion and Jewish tradition is quite strict in terms of dissuading potential converts. Why then, according to this Midrash brought down by Rebbe Nachman, would the Torah stress the fact that Yaakov returned to the land where his family converted people? There are many ways to reconcile this and interpret this.

One such explanation is that the Midrash is referring not to conversion the way we view it, but rather conversion in the sense of a recognition in G-d and nullification to His will, as opposed to living based on our own personal pleasure. That is to say, right before we begin the story of Yosef HaTzaddik, which exemplifies the resilience of Yosef in the face of immorality and physical pleasure, the Torah uses this wording to indicate that Yaakov had returned to Canaan and “made converts” by teaching his children to believe in Hashem and how to remain faithful when faced with challenges.

That is a possible reason for why this *pasuk* is always read around Chanukah. During the time of *Bayis Sheini*, the Second Beis HaMikdash, the Jews just dwelled. They wanted to live simply and comfortably. The ones who went back to Israel were not

¹⁰⁰ Likutei Moharan, Torah 228, Siman 1

¹⁰¹ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 84:4

¹⁰² Likutei Halachot, Orach Chaim, Laws of Morning Conduct 4:16

moved by religious motives. In fact, it took the strictness of Ezra and Nechemiah to get them to return from the intermarriage and immorality that plagued the nation in their return to the Holy Land. Sadly, this only lasted to the time when the Syrian-Greek (Seleucid) Empire took over. The Jews assimilated and went in the heinous and idolatrous ways of their rulers. But in the caves of the Judean hills there was one man, Matisyahu, who taught his children that no matter what, when faced with brutal oppression they must stay strong and steadfast in their faith.

The oppressive acts of Antiochus and the Seleucids were of a different nature than we have seen throughout our history. Had the Jews agreed to abandon their own customs and beliefs, and become integrated into the Greek lifestyle, they would have been left alone. Their oppressors sought only to destroy them spiritually. By enacting decrees forbidding Jewish practice, they thought they could destroy the Jewish nation. After seven years of battle, the Maccabees successfully defeated the Seleucids and restored the Temple. That is when the miracle of the oil could occur. Like the *hashgacha pratis* seen throughout Yosef's ordeals, the Chanukah story shows that no matter what others do to destroy you, if you stay strong in your commitment to G-d and the ways of your forefathers, you will merit open signs of His presence in your life. When Hashem granted Matisyahu and the Hasmoneans victory over the Syrian-Greeks, he was preserving the spirituality of the Jewish nation. But that was not enough, people could have denied His presence in our salvation. Therefore he gave us the miracle of the oil, to show the world the mission of the Jewish people, to bring light into a world of darkness.

Mikeitz: Intertwined with Chanukah to teach us one message

"וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁנַתִּים יָמִים וַפְרָעָה חֲלֹם וַהֲנֶה עֹמֵד עַל-הַיָּאָר:"

After two years' time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile.¹⁰³

"Mikeitz", explains Rashi¹⁰⁴, means after, or more literally "at the end". The parsha continues the narrative of Yosef in prison and details his release. The Baal Shem Tov comments¹⁰⁵ on this pasuk based on a Midrash which expounds a verse from Iyov. The pasuk reads, "קֵץ שֵׁם לְחֹשֶׁךְ"¹⁰⁶, "There will be an end to the darkness". This Midrash compares Yosef's release from prison to the final redemption of Mashiach when there will be no more spiritual darkness. The *heilige* Baal Shem Tov brings a beautiful and revolutionary *drasha* based on this Midrash: As long as a person's evil inclination, his or her desire to do negative things, exists, it is like being in prison; they cannot freely serve Hashem. Pitch blackness and the shadow of death characterize their reality. As long as their "sparks of holiness"¹⁰⁷ are confined to the physical, it is like a person in prison! Teaches the Baal Shem Tov, the purpose, the *avodah* of a Jew in this world, in Torah, *mitzvos*, and every aspect of life (such as eating and drinking) is for a person to control their *kavanos*, their thoughts, to extract and elevate these "*nitzotzos*" is as if he or she is fulfilling the biblical commandment of *Pidyon Shevuyim*, redeeming captives!

It is no coincidence that the *parshiyos* of Yosef HaTzadik fall out on or around Chanukah. The story of Yosef is a story of complete and total nullification of the *yetzer hara*. When faced with the biggest temptations and physical pleasures, Yosef overcame his evil inclination and used every moment of his life to make the world a more G-dly place, all while serving first as a slave and then as a viceroy in Egypt.

¹⁰³ Bereishis 41:1

¹⁰⁴ Rashi on Bereishis, 41:1, מִקֵּץ וַיְהִי

¹⁰⁵ Sefer Baal Shem Tov Al HaTorah, Bereishis, Mikeitz, 1

¹⁰⁶ Iyov 28:3

¹⁰⁷ **It is brought down throughout the Zohar, the teachings of the Arizal, and the writings of the *mekubalim* that there are "*nitzotzos shel kedusha*", divine sparks that exist in every part of the physical world.** The Kabbalists teach that these "*nitzotzos*" or sparks of holiness are made up of the same 248 spiritual limbs and 365 spiritual veins, arteries and sinews that are the spiritual make-up of a human.

The Shulchan Aruch¹⁰⁸, in describing how Chanukah is observed, notes that although it is permissible, and has even become customary, to have a festive meal in honour of Chanukah, this custom is not part of the observance of Chanukah, as ordained by our sages. Instead, Chanukah is observed in a more spiritual way, with the lighting of a candle¹⁰⁹, as well as expressions of thanks and praise of Hashem. This is in contrast to the other rabbinically instituted holiday, Purim, when a festive meal and the exchange of gifts of food are intrinsic to the observances of the day.

The Levush¹¹⁰, explains this incongruity as follows: Purim commemorates the time that Haman, minister to King Achashverosh, enacted a decree calling for the extermination of the entire Jewish people. Had the Jews agreed to renounce their religious practices, and adopt the customs of the nation amongst which they resided, the murderous Haman would not have been satisfied, and would still have called for the annihilation of the Jews. Thus, when Hashem miraculously caused Haman's fall from power, and the subsequent salvation of the Jews, it was a salvation of their physical beings; their spiritual existence was never in danger. The most appropriate way to express our thanks to Hashem for saving our physical beings is by demonstrating our freedom to enjoy the physical gifts he has provided us with.

The oppressive acts of Antiochus and the Syrian-Greeks were of a different nature. Had the Jews agreed to abandon their own customs and beliefs, and become integrated into the Greek lifestyle, they would have been left alone. Their oppressors sought only to destroy them spiritually. And so, when Hashem granted Matisyahu and the Hasmoneans victory over the Syrian-Greeks, he was preserving the spirituality of the Jewish nation. Our appreciation for this gift, the opportunity to serve Hashem and recognize him as our G-d, is best acknowledged through spiritual expressions of Hashem's praise. All of our holiday-related activities on Chanukah should carry this significance with it. We should take the opportunities at this time of year that we are granted with to praise Hashem and reaffirm our commitment to Him.

At Chanukah, the darkest point of the year, Jewish tradition teaches us to light candles, to sit and bask in their glory, to reflect on ourselves and figure out how we can overcome our innate desires for physicality to light up our *pinetle yid*, our "*nitzotzos*". After all, we can only spread the miracle of Chanukah, the miracle of the light, the

¹⁰⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Siman 670, Seif 2

¹⁰⁹ Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 21b- It is brought down in a *braisa* that the basic obligation of candle lighting on Chanukah is one candle per household, נר איש וביתו

¹¹⁰ Quoted by the Mishnah Berurah 670:6

miracle of Jewish survival and of G-d's presence in this world, if we ignite the fires within and become our best selves.

Vayigash: Yehudah's Message To Us

וַיֵּגֶשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אָדֹנִי יִדְבָּר־נָא עִבְדְּךָ דְּבַר בָּאָזְנִי אָדֹנִי
וְאֶל־יָחִיד אֶפְרָיִם בְּעִבְדְּךָ כִּי כְמוֹךָ כְּפָרְעָה:"

Then Yehudah went up to him and said, “Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh.”¹¹¹

Rashi comments¹¹² based on a Midrash¹¹³ that Yehudah came close to Yosef, as a plea of sorts, as if to say “may my words penetrate into your ears.” The Sforno writes¹¹⁴ that after Yosef himself said that he simply wanted to bring Binyamin, accused of stealing the goblet, to justice, Yehudah’s logic was to say “let me explain to you what unfairness and perversion of justice would result from the sentence you plan to give.” The Daas Zekeinim¹¹⁵ explains Yehudah’s logic in challenging Yosef’s punishment for Binyamin by way of a *maschal*, an allegory. Normally, when a slave owner buys additional slaves and finds out that they steal from him, he demands his money back from the seller and returns such slaves to him. Yehudah is asking his brother, whom he does not recognize, why would you do the opposite, by preferring to have Binyamin, a thief, your slave as opposed to me? There are many more commentaries each explaining Yehudah’s pleas and his logic behind his statement in the first *pasuk* of this week’s parsha. One thing is for sure, Yehudah was doing his utmost to get Binyamin freed.

There is a simple commentary of the Chizkuni¹¹⁶, a clarification of sorts, that the reason why Yehudah was the one carrying on this dialogue with Yosef was that it was he who had guaranteed Binyamin’s safe return to their father. Anyone who learned the previous parsha should remember Yehudah’s promise to his father, Yaakov, at the end of Parshas Mikeitz. What is it that the Chizkuni is adding? The answer is quite elementary, but its profundity is worth pondering. The Chizkuni writes that Yehudah made a promise to his father and as such, he was doing everything in his power to keep it. That is why Rebbe Nachman writes in Likutei Moharan¹¹⁷ that the confrontation of Yehudah and Yosef HaTzadik is a meeting of one king with another¹¹⁸.

¹¹¹ Bereishis 44:18

¹¹² Rashi on Bereishis, 44:18, וַיֵּגֶשׁ אֵלָיו וגו' . . . דְּבַר בָּאָזְנִי אָדֹנִי

¹¹³ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 93:6

¹¹⁴ Sforno on Bereishis, 44:18, יִדְבָּר־נָא עִבְדְּךָ

¹¹⁵ Daas Zekeinim on Bereishis, 44:18, וַיֵּגֶשׁ אֵלָיו וגו' . . . דְּבַר בָּאָזְנִי אָדֹנִי

¹¹⁶ Chizkuni on Bereishis, 44:18, יְהוּדָה

¹¹⁷ Likutei Moharan, 62:7

¹¹⁸ See Likutei Halachot, Orach Chaim, Laws of Morning Conduct 3:1 for clarification

Yehudah, who had raised children who ultimately chose to veer from the path of their ancestors and of Hashem¹¹⁹, who fathered children born from a seemingly promiscuous relationship, would ultimately become the father of Mashiach, because of his *bittul hayesh*, his total self-negation. Yehudah was willing to exchange himself for his younger brother. Just as his descendants, the Maccabees, fought against the mighty Syrian-Greeks, so too Yehudah was prepared to go to war against Pharaoh and the Egyptian Empire; if that was what was needed to free his brother¹²⁰. He knew the decimation of Yaakov and of the Jewish people that would come with Binyamin's imprisonment in Egypt. That is why, knowing what was at stake, he kept his promise to his father and to all of *Klal Yisrael*, to make sure Binyamin came home alive. His emotion, his passion, his commitment to his word, to his parents, and to the future of the Jewish people showed Yosef that he and his brothers had changed, and that they deeply regretted what they had put their brother through.

Yehudah, in how he speaks, teaches that courage and humility are two opposite directions for the soul to travel at once, but it is our task in life to make them one, to remain modest and grounded while speaking up and defending what we perceive as injustice. Just as Yehudah had his promise to keep, each and everyone of us has our own promises to keep, our unique missions in life. This narrative of Yehudah's passionate speech and pleas before Yosef shows us that in a moment, we can rise above all our previous misdeeds and our ego, to subjugate ourselves to the will of others and of Hashem.

¹¹⁹ Bereishis 38:6-11

¹²⁰ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 93:6

Vayechi: Becoming A Leader

וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂרָה שָׁנָה וַיְחִי יְמֵי יַעֲקֹב
שְׁנֵי חֲמִיּוֹ שָׁבַע שָׁנִים וְאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאָת שָׁנָה:

Yaakov lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt, so that the span of Yaakov's life came to one hundred and forty-seven years¹²¹.

The parsha opens with Yaakov on his deathbed, seventeen years after arriving in Egypt. The Radak¹²², in commentary on the first *pasuk* of this week's parsha, points out that just as Yosef was under the protection of his father for the first seventeen years of his life, before being sold into slavery by his brothers, so too his father, Yaakov, was under Yosef's protection for the last seventeen years of his life. Says the Radak, when Yaakov came down to Mitzrayim and the family was reunited, it was, in essence, a changing of the guard. Yosef now became the protector of Yaakov and the leader of the Jewish people.

This lesson, which is seemingly simple, reaches the depths of what it means to be a Jew and follow in the path of our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Each and every one of us is a leader. We all have the innate ability to take a stand and take charge when the situation permits it. In Mitzrayim, when he was at the lowest point of his life, Yosef HaTzadik made a decision. When faced with the *nisayon*, with the trial of *Eishes Potiphar*, Potiphar's wife, Yosef said to himself, "I'm the man now. With Hashem's help, I determine my fate." When given the chance to interpret the dreams of Egyptian servants, and then Pharaoh, Yosef said to himself, "I'm the man now. With Hashem's help, I determine my fate." When he became viceroy of Mitzrayim and was put in charge of sustaining the planet throughout the duration of a terrible famine, Yosef said to himself, "I'm the man now. With Hashem's help, I determine my fate." When his brothers came down to Egypt to beg for food, Yosef said to himself, "I'm the man now. With Hashem's help, I determine my fate." When after revealing himself to his brothers, Yaakov and the entire family came down to Mitzrayim, Yosef said to himself, "I'm the man now. With Hashem's help, I determine my fate."

Being the son of Yaakov, Yosef knew firsthand that being good and doing good is a choice. Even though he grew up in the same household, and had the same education, his uncle, Eisav, a son of Yitzchak Avinu, Yaakov's twin brother, was a *rasha*, a truly evil

¹²¹ Bereishis 47:28

¹²² Radak on Bereishis, 47:28, וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂרָה שָׁנָה

person. Yosef saw just how easily one could fall into the darkness. He knew that the only way to succeed in the world, to follow the path he wanted to take, would be to stand strong, to speak out, to have enough confidence that he was comfortable speaking with the leader of the known world.

Rav Noach Weinberg, the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Aish HaTorah, famously said, "We all want greatness. No one says, "I wish to be mediocre." Everyone harbours the secret desire to save the world." Like Rav Noach, millennia before, Yosef HaTzadik recognized that you can either be a leader or be a nobody. In order to be great, you have to be strong, take leadership whenever the opportunity arises, and most importantly learn from the great leaders in your lifetime, to take advantage of their expertise and to take the responsibility of inspiring those even though they are greater than you.

Shemos: Past, Present, and Future

"וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ:"

And these are the names of the sons of Yisrael who came to Egypt with Yaakov, each coming with his household¹²³.

The Ibn Ezra, in his commentary, attempts to explain why the letter *vav*, the word “and” is necessary. After all, every English teacher, rightly or wrongly¹²⁴, teaches that you can never begin a sentence with the word “and”. Writes the Ibn Ezra: “The purpose of the *vav* is to recall,”¹²⁵. What does this mean? The Torah begins the Exodus story with the word “and” to remind us that *Yetzias Mitzrayim* is simply a connection of the story of the *Avos*, of *Noach*, and of creation, that make up the Genesis narrative. While quite simple and straightforward, this idea is truly inspirational. According to the Ibn Ezra, the Torah begins *Sefer Shemos*, the book of Exodus, with the word “וְאֵלֶּה”, what translates to “and these”, to teach us that at all times, when we experience hardships, in moments of slavery, in times of prayer, when miracles are clear, at the time of our salvation, we have to recognize and relate to our past.

The Chasam Sofer, like the Ibn Ezra, gives reasoning for the wording at the beginning of the parsha. In fact, the reason of the Chasam Sofer is very similar. It is possible that he could have been expounding on the commentary of the Ibn Ezra, without explicitly mentioning it. Says the Chasam Sofer: the names are listed to remind us that the descendants of Yaakov went down to *Mitzrayim*, their descendants were freed with wonders and miracles, and so we, the descendants of those emancipated slaves, the descendants of Yaakov Avinu were also freed with them¹²⁶.

The Kedushas Levi, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, writes¹²⁷ that the reason why the names of the holy tribes are enumerated once more is that their qualifications of being part of the twelve holy tribes is alluded to in their names. Says the Kedushas Levi: there is inherent holiness in those names, and this alludes to the end of *sippur yetzias mitzrayim* when the Jewish people wandered the desert, divided into the twelve tribes.

¹²³ Shemos 1:1

¹²⁴ There is much to be discussed on this issue, It is not so *pashut*, so simple. This is beyond the scope of the *dvar torah*.

¹²⁵ Ibn Ezra on Shemos, 1:1, וְאֵלֶּה

¹²⁶ Chasam Sofer on Torah, Shemos, quoting Talmud Bavli, Maseches Pesachim, 116b

¹²⁷ Kedushas Levi on Sefer Shemos, Parshas Shemos Some further explanation is required

While seemingly three totally distinct and different explanations, I believe that all these commentaries are saying the same thing. Rabbi Yediah Badrashi, in his sefer Yalkut Moshe, explains a Midrash with the following summation: “גַּם זוֹ לטוֹבָה רַ"ת גִּזְלִי”, “*Gam Zu L’Tovah*”, this too is for the good, is abbreviated into the word *gezel*, theft.” That is to say, we must steal the awareness of the ultimate good from the future and use it in the present moment. The Ibn Ezra, the Chasam Sofer, and the Kedushas Levi would certainly agree with this. However, they would also say that the first *pasuk* explains the necessity of remembering the past despite your current situation. This, in my humble opinion, is one of the most important ideas within Judaism. The immediate situation a person finds himself in is insignificant. It is the recognition of the past and realization of a future that propels a person to make the most of the present moment.

Vaera: Extra words?

"וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה:"

G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him, "I am HaShem."¹²⁸

The Gemara¹²⁹ states in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak that "the wicked, their beginning is harmony and their end is suffering, but the righteous, their beginning is suffering and their end is harmony." The Noam Elimelech, Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk, one of the founding fathers of the Chassidic movement in Poland brings a fascinating interpretation of this. Says the Noam Elimelech: the righteous need to serve Hashem from the beginning with awe, and guard oneself against being manipulated by the impulse for evil. This is "their beginning is suffering". After one has merited to break away from his or her physical desires and the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, the impulse for evil, he or she is at peace with himself or herself. This is what Rabbi Yitzchak meant when he said: "their end is harmony".

The Noam Elimelech connects this Gemara to the seemingly superfluous language in the first *pasuk* of Parshas Vaera, "וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים" and "וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו", "G-d spoke" and He "said to him." On the words "וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים", "and G-d spoke", the Noam Elimelech explains that the word for speaking, "וַיְדַבֵּר" is used to denote harshness and difficulty¹³⁰. Similarly, in reference to the name of G-d used, "אֱלֹהִים", the Noam Elimelech writes that this denotes *yirah*, fear, awe, a recognition of the unfathomable awesomeness of G-d¹³¹. The Noam Elimelech explains that the *pasuk* means that at the time Moshe was stuck in a position of awe, of intense fear and trepidation, Hashem spoke to him harshly, explaining to him "אֲנִי ה' ", "I am Hashem", your loving Father in Heaven, unique and unlike any other thing in existence, the source of all oneness.

We can now explain the intention of Rashi, who, in his commentary on our *pasuk*, writes¹³² that G-d spoke harshly with Moshe because he had spoken so critically when he said to G-d, "why have You done such evil to this people!?"¹³³. Even though it was appropriate for Hashem to speak harshly against Moshe, because he had criticized

¹²⁸ Shemos 6:2

¹²⁹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Rosh Hashanah, 16b

¹³⁰ Based on Rashi on Shemos, Ki Tisa, 32:7, וַיְדַבֵּר (Quoting from Bereishis 42:7)

¹³¹ As found in many sefarim, such as: Maor VaShemesh, Chayei Moharan, Shem Mishmuel, Yismach Moshe, Yakar MiPaz, Dover Tzedek, and so many others

¹³² Rashi on Shemos, Vaera, 6:2, וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים

¹³³ Shemos 5:22

Him, and unjustly “hurled words against Heaven”¹³⁴, since G-d recognized that Moshe reacted this way out of greatness¹³⁵, because of his love for the Jewish people, therefore, He said to him “I am Hashem”, which is an expression of love.

¹³⁴ Midrash Rabbah, Shemos, 3:9

¹³⁵ Standing up for people in desperate situations, as Avraham Avinu did with Sdom, is a measure of one's greatness, To be willing to intercede with G-d on behalf of others means you are comfortable with your own relationship with Him.

Bo: Hashem helps actualize our thoughts and feelings

"וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי־אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת־לִבּוֹ
וְאֶת־לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְנִי אֵלָה בְּקִרְבּוֹ:"

Then HaShem said to Moshe, "Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his advisors, in order that I may display these My signs among them."¹³⁶

The Kedushas Levi, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, highlights an interesting distinction between this *pasuk* and the other textual sources of the plagues. In this *pasuk*, G-d tells Moshe, "בא אל פרעה", "come to Pharaoh." Elsewhere, discussing the other *makkos*, He commanded him "לך אל פרעה", "go to Pharaoh." Another change in language that catches our attention is in conjunction with the plague of *arbeh*, locusts, where our parsha begins. In discussing other plagues, Hashem says "I have hardened the heart of Pharaoh." In relation to the *makah* of *Arbeh*, the Torah says "ויחזק ה' את־לב פרעה", "Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart"¹³⁷. Says the Kedushas Levi, we need to remember that there are two classes of miracles. One reason for Hashem having to perform miracles is in order to punish those who have been persecuting His people, to persuade them to refrain from doing that. The second class of miracles is intended to bring about a complete change of heart among those who persecute us, to encourage them to deal kindly with us instead.

When we examine the Purim story we are struck by the fact that Haman was punished, while Achashverosh was not punished. Hashem, through hidden miracles, caused his heart to undergo a revolutionary change. He became friendly to the Jews. According to the Midrash¹³⁸, each of the plagues, except the killing of the firstborn, lasted for thirty-one days, including one week after the warning which gave the people a chance to repent. We know that *Makas Bechoros*, the plague of the killing of the firstborn, occurred in the middle of the month of Nissan.

Based on the Midrash, we can calculate that the plague of *Barad*, hail, occurred in the first half of the month of Shevat, a month before Purim, and that the *makah* of

¹³⁶ Shemos 10:1

¹³⁷ Shemos 10:20

¹³⁸ Midrash Rabbah, Shemos, 9:12

Arbeh, locusts, occurred right around the time of Purim. Teaches the Berditchever, the words of our pasuk “כי אני הכבדתי את לבו”¹³⁹ come to teach us that Achashverosh’s heart had become captive so-to-speak. He was not so evil as some of our sages make him out to be, it was simply that in his drunken stupor he was influenced by Haman.

Hashem hardened the heart of Pharaoh, so that he could keep to his true nature and not give in to Moshe’s pleas while witnessing Hashem’s might. So too, with hidden miracles, He turned a stubborn, drunkard King’s heart in the time of Purim. This goes to show us that Hashem helps actualize our innermost thoughts and feelings. No matter who we are, or where we are in life, G-d will let our essence, our true selves, shine through. This is why it is crucial to clarify who we are, what we want in life, our beliefs; otherwise, we will live in a state of confusion, with life passing by, the world swarming around us.

¹³⁹ Shemos 10:1

Beshalach: Fences and Action

"וַיְהִי בְשַׁלַּח פְּרַעְהָ אֶת־הָעָם וְלֹא־נָחֵם אֱלֹהִים דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי קָרוֹב הוּא
כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים פֶּן־יִנָּחֵם הָעָם בְּרֹאֲתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרֵימָה:"

And it was when Pharaoh let the people go, G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for G-d said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt"¹⁴⁰

The Shelah HaKadosh, in his sefer, the Shnei Luchos HaBris¹⁴¹, writes on this pasuk that we learn from here what length a person has to go to make "fences," artificial safeguards to prevent himself from sinning. Even G-d Himself made such a "fence" when He decided to let Bnei Yisrael travel via an indirect route to preclude the people from having second thoughts and wanting to return to Egypt.

The Ramban, in his commentary on a *pasuk* later on, asks how our sages are able to make new decrees, "fences", to the Torah? The Ramban points out¹⁴² that these fences are very good and necessary, "...as long as we all know that this is a fence, and not directly from G-d in His Torah." These rabbinic decrees, these "fences", are not directly from the Torah, but they are Torah nevertheless. The Torah itself commands us to build fences around its prohibitions when they are necessary¹⁴³. If our spiritual leadership sees that a generation has greater temptation than earlier generations, or simply cannot be as careful as before, it has the authority and responsibility to add some more restrictions, as a preventative measure.

This explanation of the Shelah HaKadosh and the clarification of the Ramban on rabbinic authority all draws back to a principle discussed on the first *pasuk* in Parshas Vayishlach. That concept, brought down all over Shas¹⁴⁴, is "אין סומכין על הנס", one does not rely on miracles. Though Hashem is all-powerful and can do anything, at the end of the day, He took us on the "scenic route" to not only teach the necessity of putting up fences for ourselves, of setting clear boundaries, but also to remind us that we cannot rely on G-d alone. There is a system of nature, enemies like the *Plishtim* that seek to

¹⁴⁰ Shemos 13:17

¹⁴¹ Shnei Luchos HaBris, Torah SheBichsav, Beshalach, Derech Chaim,
כי אמר אלהים פן ינחם העם בראותם מלחמה ושובו מצרימה

¹⁴² Ramban on Sefer Devarim, 4:2

¹⁴³ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Yevamos, 21a

¹⁴⁴ Talmud Bavli, Shabbos, 32a; Talmud Bavli, Taanis, 20b; Talmud Bavli, Pesachim, 64b; and others

destroy us; we must stand up and fight. Hashem will save us, but we have to do our part first.

Yisro: Fulfilling our Potential

"וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה
וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ כִּי־הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם:"

Yisro priest of Midian, Moshe's father-in-law, heard all that G-d had done for Moshe and for Israel His people, how HaShem had brought Israel out from Egypt.¹⁴⁵

Rashi, right away asks what exactly did Yisro hear that caused him to come and join the Jewish nation? He answers, based on his tradition¹⁴⁶, that Yisro had become aware of *Kerias Yam Suf*, the splitting of the Sea, and the war with Amalek. The Bechor Shor,¹⁴⁷ writes that it was not just *Kerias Yam Suf* and *Milchemes Amalak*. Says the Bechor Shor, Yisro saw all the signs and wonders that Hashem did for the Jewish people through Moshe, and that Moshe became the leader.

The Midrash teaches that Moshe alone is of equal importance to all Israel¹⁴⁸. This implies that all of the events of *Yeitzias Mitzrayim*, of the exodus from Egypt, had been brought for these two equals: Moshe and the entire Jewish people. But how can one human being be equal to an entire nation? The Jewish people consisted of anywhere between six hundred thousand and three million people. As great as Moshe may have been, how is it possible that one person could be equivalent to so many?

The answer to this question lies in understanding the difference between physical and spiritual growth. On a physical plane, a human is capable of extraordinary accomplishments. People can push themselves to their limits, to a place that seems beyond human capacity. Think of an Olympic weightlifter; this athlete didn't start out lifting ridiculous amounts. He or she began just like anyone else, and through a program of progressive weight training, he or she changed his or her physicality. By systematically challenging the body, we can develop strength that is astonishing. But that strength, that physical resiliency, is limited. Physical growth is limited. While the Olympic athlete may have changed his or her muscularity and body mass index, his growth remains within the bounds of physical limitations.

¹⁴⁵ Shemos 18:1

¹⁴⁶ Midrash: Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 18:1; Talmud Bavli, Maseches Zevachim, 116a

¹⁴⁷ Bechor Shor on Shemos, 18:1

¹⁴⁸ Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, 18:1

Spiritual growth, on the other hand, is almost limitless. To better understand this, it may be helpful to focus on understanding who we are. Our psyche, the decisions that we make, our instincts, the mind that tells our fingers to move, the tongue to speak, and the legs to walk, is a spiritual entity. G-d designed us, He designed this world, with a humble beginning, in an imperfect state. Our entire existence is that we can grow. We were given all the challenges and tools needed to shape ourselves into powerful spiritual entities. The difficulty that we have in understanding our infinite potential is because we think in physical terms and try to apply them to the spiritual realm. However, spirituality has a very different set of rules.

Moshe was created with a unique *neshama*. He used his potential fully. From his first moments of understanding, he devoted himself to the Jewish people and to the service of Hashem. As a result, he grew. That growth was compounded exponentially, level after level, until he became so huge that he alone equaled an entire generation of people. Something that is impossible in the physical world, but can be realized in the realm of the soul.

The Rambam writes: "Everyone can be as righteous as Moshe Rabbeinu,"¹⁴⁹. However, the Torah explicitly mentions that "no one will ever be as great as Moshe!"¹⁵⁰ How can we be expected to be as righteous as Moshe, if no one will ever be as great as Moshe!? As Rav Elchanan Wasserman explains in his Ma'amarim¹⁵¹, when the Rambam explains that each of us can be a *tzadik* like Moshe Rabbeinu, he specifically uses the word "*tzadik*". We may not be able to become as objectively great as Moshe, but we can each become subjectively as great. Just as Moshe fulfilled his unique potential, so too, we can each fulfill our unique potential. Each and every one of us has our own unique mission that we can accomplish.

This is illustrated with the famous story told of the great Chassidic Rebbe, Reb Zusha of Hanipol. The holy Reb Zusha was crying uncontrollably on his deathbed. His *talmidim*, his students, asked him, "Rebbe, why are you so sad? After all the mitzvahs and good deeds you have done, you will surely get a great reward in heaven!" Reb Zusha replied, "I'm afraid!" He continued, "Because when I get to heaven, I know G-d is not going to ask me 'Why weren't you more like Moshe?' or 'Why weren't you more like King David?' But I'm afraid that Hashem will ask me, 'Zusha, why weren't you more like Zusha?' And then what will I say?"

¹⁴⁹ Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuva, 5:2

¹⁵⁰ Devarim 34:10

¹⁵¹ Biurei Agados, Kovetz Haaros, 7:9

When the Torah writes that "Nobody will ever be as great as Moshe" it means that nobody in the history of the creation will have that same potential. But as the Rambam writes, you "can be as righteous as Moshe Rabbeinu,"; you can maximize what you have. As Moshe did, we can tap into our spiritual potential, recognize the tools that we were given, and as such, we can actualize that potential to the best of our ability. We were created with almost unlimited potential to grow, to change our inner essence. That growth is something that we enjoy for eternity. When a person focuses on his true potential, life itself takes on a whole different dimension. Every moment is a precious opportunity to reach levels and acquire riches that will last forever.

Mishpatim: The Purpose of Torah Law

"וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר תָּשִׂים לִפְנֵיהֶם:"

These are the ordinances that you shall set before them.¹⁵²

Rashi¹⁵³ comments that wherever “אלה”, “these”, is used it cuts off the preceding section from that which it introduces¹⁵⁴; however, as discussed earlier on Parshas Shemos, “ואלה”, “and these”, is used to add something to the former subject. The Tur Ha’Aroch¹⁵⁵ explains that the letter “vav” at the beginning of the word “ואלה” means that what follows must be understood as a continuation of *Kabbalas HaTorah*, the giving of the Torah. Beyond that, the *mishpatim*, the new ordinances that are explained in Parshas Mishpatim, must be seen as a continuation of the laws which had been revealed already at Marah, where the Torah spoke of two types of laws that were taught, *chukim* and *mishpatim*. This is also the position of the Midrash¹⁵⁶. The Sforno¹⁵⁷ adds onto this, that the previous *parsha* ended with the prohibition of coveting property belonging to someone else¹⁵⁸. This did not involve action per se. By contrast, now the Torah uses the words “ואלה המשפטים”. Now the Torah speaks about laws governing the concrete nature of “אשר לרעך,” damages and belongings of your fellow man.

The Talmud states that “three who sit in judgment, the Divine Presence is with them”¹⁵⁹. Our sages teach that this means that any Beis Din, any court, is assisted by G-d in matters of judgement. As the Zohar¹⁶⁰ writes, “דאורייתא וקודשא בריך הוא כולא חד”, “the Torah and HaKadosh Baruch Hu are one and the same”. Any decision or practice that is instituted to serve G-d joins the mainstream of Jewish tradition and becomes part of the authority of the Torah itself.

The Nesivos Shalom¹⁶¹, in his first *maamar*, the first discourse on this week's *parsha*, brings a teaching from the Baal Shem Tov, based on the Zohar¹⁶², that all

¹⁵² Shemos 21:1

¹⁵³ Rashi on Shemos, 21:1, ואלה המשפטים

¹⁵⁴ Sifsei Chachamim on Shemos, 21:1, ואלה המשפטים disagrees on this statement

¹⁵⁵ Tur Ha’Aroch on Shemos, 21:1, ואלה המשפטים

¹⁵⁶ Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael, 21:1

¹⁵⁷ Sforno on Shemos, 21:1, ואלה המשפטים

¹⁵⁸ Shemos 20:13

¹⁵⁹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Brachos, 6a

¹⁶⁰ Zohar HaKadosh, Part I, 24a; Zohar HaKadosh, Part II, 60a

¹⁶¹ Nesivos Shalom Al HaTorah, Shemos, Mishpatim, ואלה המשפטים

¹⁶² Zohar HaKadosh, Part II, 94a

דין תורה, all Torah judgement, is at the end of the day אמת לאמיתו, the ultimate truth, because even in a situation where one should not have been judged against, the judgment needed to happen in order to be מתקן, to rectify, a previous גלגול, a previous incarnation.

The Baal HaTanya, the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, teaches that the purpose of creation is the construction of a dwelling place for G-d within our material world. This is based on the Midrash Tanchuma on Parshas Nasso¹⁶³, which tells us: “נִתְאַוָּה שְׁיֵהָא לוֹ דִּירָה בְּתַחְתּוֹנִים כְּמוֹ שֵׁישׁ בְּעֵלְיוֹנִים”, “Hashem desires to have a dwelling place down below, just as He has on high.”

The Nesivos Shalom explains that the reason why this parsha seemingly interrupts the story of *Matan Torah*, of the giving of the Torah, is to continue the message of the *Aseres HaDibros*, to teach us that by living our lives according to the *mishpatim*, the ordinances in the Torah that we can understand their meaning and purpose, we are fulfilling the purpose of creation; even in *Olam HaSheker*, in the world of lies and darkness that we live in, we can live according to the rule of G-d.

¹⁶³ Midrash Tanchuma, Shemos, Nasso, 16

Terumah: The Purpose of the Mishkan

"וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:"

HaShem spoke to Moshe, saying:¹⁶⁴

The Vilna Gaon, commonly known as the Gra, in Aderes Eliyahu¹⁶⁵, on the first pasuk in Parshas Ha'azinu, says that "וידבר" is linked to *Torah Shebichsav*, the Written Torah, and "ויאמר" is linked to *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, the Oral Torah. The Gra explains that this is why communication with Moshe is always with "וידבר" and that the only place where Hashem speaks to a Navi, a prophet, with "וידבר" is in reviewing a law from the Torah¹⁶⁶. The idea is that the root word "דבר" is a more direct communication than "אמר", as the prophecy of Moshe was more direct than that of the Nevi'im after him. On this pasuk, the Ibn Ezra writes¹⁶⁷ that Hashem detailed the construction of the Mishkan to Moshe Rabbeinu on Har Sinai to show that every aspect of the seemingly superfluous description of the building of the Mishkan, a mitzvah that only applied to the generation in the desert, is to make a "Mikdash" for G-d, for Him to dwell inside.

The purpose of the Mishkan, the reason why the Torah spends the next few *parshiyos* detailing that which, to our understanding, will never apply again, is to signal that the principal presence of G-d is to be on earth, amongst the Jewish people, as is clear from the words "ושכנתי בתוכם", "I shall reside amongst them"¹⁶⁸. The Kedushas Levi, Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, wrote "בתוכם" means within the hearts and minds of the Jewish people¹⁶⁹. The Mishkan was a portable sanctuary, a spiritual center in the midst of the desert. It was not only a place in which the *Korbanos* were brought, where many sacrificial duties were performed¹⁷⁰, a physical place to confine G-d's presence; it was also a lesson; that it is within us that Hashem can be found. The Ramban¹⁷¹ explains that the purpose of the Mishkan was to serve as a continuation of the experience of Har Sinai, a sort of constant revelation of G-dliness throughout the Jewish people's journey in the desert.

¹⁶⁴ Shemos 25:1

¹⁶⁵ Aderes Eliyahu, Devarim, קיב

¹⁶⁶ Yehoshua 20:1, When it reviews the laws of cities of refuge to Yehoshua

¹⁶⁷ Ibn Ezra on Shemos, 25:1, וידבר

¹⁶⁸ Shemos 25:8

¹⁶⁹ Kedushas Levi, Vayikra, Shemini, 5

¹⁷⁰ Sefer HaMitzvos, Asaih, 20, Beis HaBechirah, 1:1

¹⁷¹ Ramban on Shemos, 25:1, based on the Zohar

In order to create a situation where Jewish people would be constantly inspired, the Torah gave us the mitzvah of creating the Mishkan, then the Beis HaMikdash, a spiritual center to serve as a source of inspiration for the Jewish people and the entire world. With no Beis HaMikdash today, our centers of spiritual experience and inspiration are our schools, our shuls, our Batei Midrash, the miniature *Mikdashim* that we are left with. Without the physical reminder, it is even more important to make sure that we bring G-d's presence into this world, to ensure that within us, Hashem dwells within physicality, so that one day, G-d willing very soon, we will rebuild that physical site, and have the ultimate "*Dirah B'Tachtonim*", dwelling place for G-d in the physical world.

Tetzaveh: Hishtadlus and the Menorah

"וְאַתָּה תְצַוֶּה אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיָקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ שֶׁמֶן זַיִת זָךְ כְּתִית לְמָאֹר לְהַעֲלֹת נֵר תָּמִיד:"
You shall further instruct Bnei Yisrael to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps constantly.¹⁷²

The word “תמיד” means always, constantly, or continuously. Rashi¹⁷³ attempts to explain that even though the Menorah does not burn during the day, only from nightfall until day, it is still called “תמיד”, as if it burned constantly¹⁷⁴. Here, Rashi brings different proofs from the description of several Korbanos performed in the times of the Mishkan and Beis HaMikdash to prove this interpretation of the word¹⁷⁵. That being said, Rashi also brings an attack of sorts on himself; the expression “תמיד” which is used in connection with the *lechem hapanim*, the show-bread kept on the *Shulchan*, is used to denote a continuous period, without a break, from one Shabbos to the next¹⁷⁶. With this, Rashi argues that there is no substantial proof that the term “תמיד” can be applied to something that has gaps, that has breaks, because it is also used to describe something truly continuous.

Rashi also writes¹⁷⁷, based on a Gemara¹⁷⁸, that the Menorah was able to burn “תמיד”, “constantly”, because the Kohanim kindled the Menorah until G-d made a miracle, causing the flames to ascend by itself. The flames burned on its own so-to-speak (as it did in the first Beis HaMikdash and during the miracle of Chanukah). This, in itself, is a fascinating *sugya*, and what it actually means can be discussed at great length. The point Rashi is making, based on the statement in the Talmud, that the purpose of the Menorah was for us to do our most, to do our *hishtadlus*, to put in the effort required, and that G-d would provide the rest.

This makes it so clear that Rashi, in his proofs and contradiction, along with this other comment, paints an incredible picture of what the word “תמיד” in this context means, and what the concept of the Menorah is all about. We know the famous excerpt from the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos¹⁷⁹, "It is not incumbent on you to finish the task, but

¹⁷² Shemos 27:20

¹⁷³ Rashi on Shemos, 27:20, תמיד

¹⁷⁴ Sifsei Chachamim, Shemos, 27:20, 7

¹⁷⁵ Vayikra 6:13; Bamidbar 27:6

¹⁷⁶ Shemos 25:30

¹⁷⁷ Rashi on Shemos, 27:20, להעלות נר תמיד

¹⁷⁸ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Shabbos, 21a

¹⁷⁹ Avos, 2:21

neither are you free to absolve yourself from it." The Menorah teaches that by doing something consistently, even if it does not last as long as we would like, it is as if it continued and lasted throughout. Like so many other moments of the Jewish people in the desert, the concept of the Menorah teaches us that G-d doesn't ask us to make things happen; He only expects us to put in our maximum effort and try our best, then He promises to take us the rest of the way.

Ki Tisa: Machatzis HaShekel- A tool for connection

"וַיֹּדֹבֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וְנָתַנּוּ אִישׁ כֹּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לַיהוָה

בְּפֻקֹּד אֹתָם וְלֹא־יְהִי בָהֶם נֶגֶף בְּפֻקֹּד אֹתָם:

HaShem spoke to Moshe, saying:

When you take a census of Bnei Yisrael according to their enrollment, each shall pay HaShem a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled.¹⁸⁰

These *pesukim*, the opening *pesukim* in Parshas Ki Tisa, are also read as the Maftir for Parshas Shekalim. The Torah describes a census of the Jewish People which was taken after the Exodus from Egypt. The Gemara¹⁸¹ states in the name of Rabbi Elazar that “Whoever counts a group of Jews violates a negative mitzvah.” The Gemara continues in the name of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak that “one who counts a group of Jews in fact violates two negative mitzvos.” Here and in other places, the Torah teaches that it is forbidden to count Jews in an ordinary manner; rather, the people should be called upon to contribute items, which would then be counted

In the case of this census, the item which was contributed, by rich and poor alike, was a half-shekel, the “shekel” being the coin in use at the time, roughly equivalent to our dollar. The collected *shekalim* were then used for the construction and upkeep of the Mishkan, the portable Temple, which was used until the Temple found its permanent residence on Har HaBayis in Jerusalem. The equal participation of all symbolizes that all Jews must share in the service of G-d, in the mission of our people. One who joins in this obligatory donation of the half-shekel gains infinite benefit, because the mission of Israel is dependent upon the unity of the whole¹⁸².

A beautiful explanation of the concept of the *Daled Parshiyos*, the four special readings we read on Shabbos between the beginning of Adar and Pesach, is found in the Nesivos Shalom. Says the Nesivos Shalom, *Machatzis HaShekel*, the subject of Parshas Shekalim and of the beginning of Parshas Ki Tisa, connects a Jew to the Beis

¹⁸⁰ Shemos 30:11-12

¹⁸¹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Yoma, 22b

¹⁸² Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, cited in the ArtScroll Stone Edition of the Chumash

HaMikdash. By each paying the same half-shekel, every Jew buys his own equal portion in the Temple. The Beis HaMikdash and the *Korbanos* that were offered there point to the eternal bond between a Jew and Hashem. Each year, when we give the *Machtzis HaShekel*, we reaffirm and renew our commitment to the *avodah*, to the service of Hashem.

The opening of Parshas Ki Sisa, the same as the reading of Parshas Shekalim, teaches us that each and every one of us has an equal portion of G-dliness within us. It is up to us to put in effort, to do everything that we can, to maintain the relationship.

Vayakhel: The Meaning of Shabbos

"וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כָּל־עֵדֻת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אֱלֹהִים
הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֲתֶם:"

**Moshe then gathered the entirety of Bnei Yisrael and said to them:
“These are the things that HaShem has commanded you to do”.¹⁸³**

Rashi, in his commentary on this *pasuk*, comments that it was on the day after Yom Kippur that Moshe came down from Har Sinai¹⁸⁴. Immediately after G-d forgives the Jewish people for the *Chet Ha'Egel*, the sin of the golden calf, Moshe gathers the entire Jewish people to teach them the laws of Shabbos. So what is so special about the *mitzvos* of Shabbos, of the day of Shabbos, that Moshe had to reiterate its importance right after Hashem forgave the Jewish people and worked with Moshe Rabbeinu on the second set of *luchos*.

Our tradition teaches us¹⁸⁵ that though there is a set limit, a time when the end of days will come, that it will happen in its time regardless of whether or not the Jewish people will do teshuvah, if the Jewish people keep just one Shabbos, Mashiach will come immediately, because the “Shabbos is equivalent to all the mitzvos,”¹⁸⁶. Our sages further explain that “anyone who observes Shabbos properly, even if he worships idols, like the generation of Enosh, (when paganism first emerged), is forgiven,”¹⁸⁷. Clearly there is something intrinsically different about Shabbos, something that makes it so crucial to Jewish life.

Shabbos does not function in this world, but takes us to a place above it, On Shabbos, a person can achieve accomplishments that are beyond his or her ordinary grasp, above nature. Chazal describe Hashem’s instructions to Moshe about relating the laws of Shabbos to Bnei Yisrael. “I have a wonderful gift in my house of treasures. It’s name is Shabbos. Go forth and make it known to them!”¹⁸⁸. Why is Shabbos called a

¹⁸³ Shemos 35:1

¹⁸⁴ Rashi on Shemos, 35:1, ויקהל משה

¹⁸⁵ Midrash Rabbah, Shemos, 25:121

¹⁸⁶ Talmud Yerushalmi, Maseches Nedarim, 38b

Our sages, on various occasions, site a specific mitzvah or notion as being “equivalent to all the mitzvos in the Torah.” Clearly their intent cannot be that it is sufficient to perform only one commandment. Rather, the sages employed this expression to underscore each specific notion as an all-encompassing ideal of the Torah, an ideal which addresses the very purpose of creation.

¹⁸⁷ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Shabbos, 118b

¹⁸⁸ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Shabbos, 10a

wonderful gift, while other mitzvos are not? Because only Shabbos takes us elsewhere, only Shabbos is a taste of the world to come¹⁸⁹.

The Avudraham, explains that each of the tefillos on Shabbos has a different liturgy, in sharp contrast to the single formula used for Shacharis, Mincha, and Maariv on any holiday, because each tefillah reflects a completely different level of connection to Hashem, each requires a matching liturgical expression. The Socachover Rebbe, Rabbi Avrohom Bornsztain, likened Shabbos and our *avodah* to the steps that constitute a marriage. Every Shabbos follows a similar progression. Leil Shabbos brings with it *kiddushin*, our readying ourselves for G-d's company. On Shabbos morning, we stand under the chuppah, within His enveloping light. The most intense closeness, likened to the *yichud* room, is reserved for the waning hours of Shabbos, at the time of *Shalosh Seudos/Seudah Shlishit*, the third meal. Once a week, we make a wedding, we renew our vows so-to-speak.

We can offer an understanding of why our sages liken the weight of Shabbos as the equal to all the other mitzvos of the Torah, why Shabbos is considered an all-encompassing ideal of the Torah, an ideal which addresses the very purpose of creation. Being Jewish is all about one's relationship with Hashem, specifically moving closer to Him and clinging to him, *Ahavas Hashem and Dveikus*. Shabbos is, in essence, the make-it or break-it experience. It is unique in its ability to bring us closer to Hashem.

The Or HaChaim HaKadosh, Rabbi Chaim Ibn Attar¹⁹⁰, quotes the Yalkut Shimoni¹⁹¹ which understands the use of the word ויקהל as an allusion to the same word elsewhere in the Torah¹⁹².

The message is that on Shabbos there are to be large assemblies of people in order to teach them Torah and especially “אלה הדברים”, the details about the ordinances connected with true Sabbath observance. Even when we are not together with others physically, we are always united together with our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world. Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, the Rav of Congregation Aish Kodesh and a *mashpia*, an influencer, at Yeshiva University explained it best: “*Ahavas Yisrael*, feeling that connection, that love for fellow Jews, does not come from being with a person. Though there's so much that separates us, in essence, we are bound together. When you

¹⁸⁹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Brachos, 57b

¹⁹⁰ Or HaChaim on Shemos, 35:1

¹⁹¹ Yalkut Shimoni on Torah, Remez 408

¹⁹² Devarim 31:12

have a relationship with another Jew, you feel that connection even when you're not together."

The "secular" Jewish poet Asher Tzvi Hirsch Ginsberg, known by his pen name Achad Ha'am, wrote the now famous line, "More than Jews have kept Shabbos, Shabbos has kept the Jews." Shabbos is our respite from the chaos of the world. As Rabbi Joey Rosenfeld beautifully puts it: "If the week is dark, shabbos is light. If the week is many, shabbos is one. If the week is anxiety, shabbos is calmness. If the week is fear, shabbos is comfort. If the week is broken, shabbos is fixed. If the week is loud, shabbos is silent. If the week is broken, shabbos is whole."

Pekudei: A Temporary Dwelling

"אלה פקודי המשכן משכן העדות אשר פקד על-פי משה עבד
הלויים ביד איתמר בן-אהרן הכהן:"

These are the records of the Mishkan, the Mishkan of testimony, which were drawn up at Moshe's bidding, the work of the Levites under the direction of Itamar son of Aharon HaKohen.¹⁹³

The Or HaChaim HaKadosh taught¹⁹⁴ that the Torah uses the word אלה, these, to emphasise that the only true accounts is what follows, the Torah's account of the building of the Mishkan. Whatever man has are only apparent possessions; their account is also only apparent, deceptive. The only true count of material objects on earth was of the components of the Mishkan, because it contained levels of holiness, because G-d had His residence within it.

This is illustrated by the following story. A wealthy Jew from a distant country travelled a long way to Radin, a small town in Poland, to visit Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the saintly Chafetz Chaim. "Where is your furniture?" asked the astonished visitor of the saintly sage when he saw how barely furnished the room was. The Chafetz Chaim responded, "And where is yours?" The visitor responded, "I have no furniture with me because I am only passing through." The Chafetz Chaim said, "I, too, am only passing through this world for our lives here are only a preparation for the real world, the World to Come. For merely passing through this corridor of time I have enough furniture." The Chafetz Chaim was living with the Mishnah¹⁹⁵ in which Rabbi Yaakov taught that this world is like a vestibule before the world to come; prepare yourself in the vestibule, so that you may enter the banquet hall.

Though ultimately the grand, elegant, magnificent Beis HaMikdash was built, Hashem gave us the Torah and taught us how to serve him in the *midbar*, in the desert. The very existence of the Mishkan teaches us that when we feel empty, when we feel like we have been living in a spiritual desert, there is no need for despair. Regardless of a person's spiritual level, Hashem offers him the opportunity of establishing a connection through the medium of the Torah. Belief in G-d means yearning, desiring, and longing.

¹⁹³ Shemos 38:21

¹⁹⁴ Or HaChaim on Shemos, 38:21, אלה פקודי המשכן

¹⁹⁵ Avos 4:16

It means knowing that we are incomplete, that we are waiting for something, that our lives here are only temporary.

Vayikra: Hashem is Calling Out to You

"וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר:"

HaShem called to Moshe and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying:¹⁹⁶

The Midrash,¹⁹⁷ gives a beautiful approach to the meaning of the words, "וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה", "And He called to Moshe." Sefer Shemos, the book detailing *yetzias mitzrayim* and *matan torah*, the exodus from Egypt and giving of the Torah, ends with Parshas HaMishkan, the Torah portion discussing the building of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary for G-d. The Midrash teaches: This can be compared to a King who commanded his servant and said to him, "build me a palace." On every item which the servant built, he wrote the name of the King on it. When he built walls, he wrote the name of the King on them. When he stood up columns, he wrote the name of the King on them. When he installed beams, he wrote the name of the King on them. After a while, the King entered the palace. Everywhere he looked, he found his name written. He said, "All this great honour was afforded to me by my servant and I am in the palace while he is outside!?" The King called the servant to enter into the inner part of the palace.

The Midrash uses this analogy to describe the relationship between the end of Sefer Shemos, and the beginning of Sefer Vayikra, the commandments of the Korbanos and the Ketores. Teaches the Midrash, when Hashem said to Moshe, "וַעֲשֵׂה לִי מִקְדָּשׁ", "build me a Sanctuary," on every single thing, Moshe wrote, "כָּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה", "as Hashem had commanded Moshe." The Midrash describes to us that Hashem thought: "All of this great honour was given to me by Moshe and I'm inside and he is outside!?" G-d called to Moshe to invite him into his domain, to enter the inner place, to come closer to him, and began teaching the laws of the service in the Mishkan.

Sefer Vayikra contains very little stories. It is a book of laws, a list of mitzvos. Yet, it begins with Hashem calling out to Moshe, calling for Moshe to draw near to Him. The purpose of this is quite clear. Each and every mitzvah is important. We have to learn what is expected of us, the actions we must take in order to come closer to Hashem. But

¹⁹⁶ Vayikra 1:1

¹⁹⁷ Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra, 1:7

first, we have to recognize that G-d is calling out to us, He is patiently waiting for us to draw closer to Him.

Tzav: The importance of Emotional Connection

"וַיֹּדֶבֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
צוּ אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר זֹאת תֹּרַת הָעֹלָה הוּא הָעֹלָה עַל מוֹקְדָה עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה
עַד־הַבֹּקֶר וְאֵשׁ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תִּהְיֶה בָּהּ:"

HaShem spoke to Moshe, saying:

“Command Aharon and his sons by saying: This is the ritual of the burnt offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on”.¹⁹⁸

Parashas Tzav begins with the mitzvah of the Korban Olah, the elevation offering, as well as the commandment of removing the ashes of the consumed sacrifices from the Altar. The Korban Olah, which atones for sinful thoughts, is completely burned on the Altar. On the other hand, a Korban Chatas, a sin-offering, which atones for a sin that a person actually committed, is partially eaten by the Kohanim¹⁹⁹. This seems counterintuitive. Since doing a sin is worse than only thinking about it, why is the Korban Chatas more lenient in this regard than the Korban Olah? Shouldn't their treatment be reversed, with the sacrifice brought by somebody requiring atonement for an actual transgression completely offered to Hashem and forbidden for human consumption, while the offering of somebody who merely thought about sinning is split between the Kohanim and the Altar?

The answer is simple. Not at all! At first glance, our reaction is to say that obviously doing a sin is worse than thinking about doing a sin. Yet, the Gemara²⁰⁰ teaches otherwise. *Hirhurei aveirah kashim m'aveirah*, sinful thoughts are considered even worse than actual sins. Rashi²⁰¹ explains that this does not refer to the severity of the sin, but to the lust that accompanies thinking about the sin, which is even greater than what exists during the sinful act itself. Nevertheless, most commentaries understand the statement to be referring to the severity of the thought and the act. In Moreh Nevuchim, the Rambam explains that the mind, the intellect, is on a much higher

¹⁹⁸ Vayikra, 6:1-2

¹⁹⁹ Vayikra 6:19

²⁰⁰ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Yoma, 29a

²⁰¹ Rashi on the Talmud, Maseches Yoma, 29a, הרהורי עבירה

level than physical activities. Therefore, sinning in one's thoughts creates greater damage to the person than does an act of sinning²⁰².

The Sefer HaChinuch²⁰³ stresses the fact that human personality is influenced by external deeds and experiences. In order to create a situation where Jewish people would be uplifted by visiting this spiritual center and witness the presence of G-d in the conduct of the Kohanim and their service, the Torah gave us the mitzvah of creating the Mishkan, then the Beis HaMikdash, a spiritual center to serve as a source of inspiration for the Jewish people and the entire world. The Chinuch elaborates that the Torah's philosophy is that when a person sins, he cannot be cleansed merely through verbal utterances. Instead, the purpose of *korbanos*, of the sacrificial offerings, is to compel the sinner to engage in a time-consuming and complex procedure that will reinforce within him the evil nature of his act and thereby hopefully cause him to refrain from repeating it in the future. The notion that actions affect attitudes is cited by Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler in Michtav M'Eliyahu, published in English under the title Strive for Truth²⁰⁴, as the philosophy underlying the performance of *mitzvos*. Rav Dessler explains outward actions stimulate inward emotions. In fact, this is also a cornerstone of modern psychology.

The Noam Elimelech, Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk, explains that the entire purpose of Har Sinai, of the Torah, of every mitzvah, is for a Jew to recognize that there is a Creator, that G-d exists. The Talmud,²⁰⁵ records a comment of Abba Shaul on the pasuk “זה א-לי ואגדלו”²⁰⁶, “this is **my** G-d and I will exalt him”. Teaches Abba Shaul, *Ve'anveihu* should be interpreted as if it were written in two words: *Ani v'Hu*, me and Him. Not only is the entire purpose of Torah simply to feel a closeness to G-d, but it is to recognize that Hashem is your G-d. You have a personal relationship with Him! As Rebbe Nachman of Breslov said, “It is very good to talk out your heart to G-d just as you would talk out your heart to a true friend.”

As Chazal taught, and as realized by modern psychology, our actions simply cultivate our emotions. That is why the Gemara teaches that sinful thoughts are worse than the actions themselves. That is why the Korban Olah, the sacrifice offered for a sinful thought, is entirely burned, while the Korban Chatas, the sin-offering, is given partially to the Kohanim to eat. Following *halacha* is important; refraining from sin is crucial to Jewish life. We should be striving to do our utmost to refine ourselves and to

²⁰² Seen in the Daf Yomi notes of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

²⁰³ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 95

²⁰⁴ Strive For Truth, Part 5, Parshas Va'Yetzei

²⁰⁵ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Shabbos, 133b

²⁰⁶ Shemos 15:2

make ourselves the best people we can be. But at the end of the day, we need to recognize that it's what is in our heart that matters most. We need to remember all the *mitzvos*, all of Jewish ritual, is to teach us that Hashem desires a relationship with us, that we have a relationship with Him. No matter what you do, no matter how far you may stray, no matter how distant you may feel, know that G-d loves you and is waiting for you to get closer to Him.

Shemini: Eating and Leadership!?

"וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי קָרָא מֹשֶׁה לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו וּלְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:"
On the eighth day Moshe called Aharon and his sons,
and the elders of Israel.²⁰⁷

The Daas Zekeinim²⁰⁸ points out that “קרא”, the word for called, is found throughout Tanach, being used for inviting someone to eat in order to satiate himself²⁰⁹. We also find that expression used when someone is chosen for greatness, when G–d chose Moshe and Aharon for their lofty positions, G–d having told Moshe to call his brother Aharon in²¹⁰. We now find it here where Moshe Rabbeinu is called upon to make the appointment of Aharon and his sons as Kohanim public knowledge.

“Ever since Chavah saw the fruit of the Eitz HaDaas and she desired it, there is a part in us which desires food as soon as we see food, and this desire is coming from evil. It is the desire to simply eat the food and satisfy the desire.²¹¹” Halacha is clear about how to eat as a Jew. We must eat Kosher food. When we eat or drink, we have to recite a bracha both before and after. There's an obligation to say Divrei Torah at every meal²¹². A person should not eat or drink standing²¹³. The Gemara²¹⁴ is the source of several Rishonim learn from this concept that one should cover metal knives that are on the table at the time of *bentching*, as metal is kept away from the mizbeach because the latter lengthens life and the former shortens it²¹⁵. Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the Rema recommends to put salt on the table, just as salt was put on the Korbanos²¹⁶. As well, there is a prohibition to kill insects on a table²¹⁷

Our table is likened to the *Mizbeach*, the altar. The Daas Zekeinim points out that the *lashon*, the language of “קרא” being used both when one eats to satiate himself and when a leader is chosen for greatness, because the principle is the same. When one eats

²⁰⁷ Vayikra 9:1

²⁰⁸ Daas Zekeinim on Vayikra, 9:1, וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי קָרָא מֹשֶׁה לְאַהֲרֹן וּבָנָיו,

²⁰⁹ Yechezkel 36:29; Melachim II 8:1

²¹⁰ Shemos 4:14

²¹¹ If You Like To Eat Read This, [Chodesh Shevat], Rabbi Itamar Schwartz

²¹² Avos 3:3; Chayeh Adam 45:4; Aruch HaShulchan 170:1; Mishnah Brurah 170:1

²¹³ Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 42:2

²¹⁴ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Chulin, 27a

²¹⁵ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 180

²¹⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 167:5

²¹⁷ Sefer Chasidim, siman 102; Sha'ar Hatziyun 167:26; Kaf Hachayim on Orach Chaim 167:41;

only to satiate himself or herself, when he or she controls their lusts and desires, when a person eats only what is necessary, not excess, we show Hashem that we are ready to be called on by Hashem to lead others. After all, we were not created simply to reach the next world. We were created to live in this world, to make this world a more G-dly place. We were created to transform physicality, our material world, into a place that G-d can call home²¹⁸.

²¹⁸ See Mishpatim/Terumah (“*Dirah B’Tachtonim*” or making a dwelling place for G-d.)

Tazria: Hashem Needs Mankind

"וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ וְיָלְדָה זָכָר וְטָמְאָה
שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כִּי־מִי נִדַּת דּוֹתָהּ תִּטְמָא:"

Speak to Bnei Yisrael and say: When a woman at childbirth bears a male, she shall be unclean seven days; she shall be unclean as at the time of her menstrual infirmity.²¹⁹

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, in his sefer the Kedushas Levi notes²²⁰ that many have asked what conceptual link there is between the idea of a woman becoming impure upon childbirth and the commandment of *bris milah*, circumcision, having to be performed on the eighth day after infant's birth, found in the next pasuk²²¹.

The Zohar HaKadosh teaches²²² that Hashem created the various universes in order that He be perceived by His creatures as "רחום וחנון", "compassionate and graceful"²²³. On occasion, G-d's compassion is "awakened" by acts performed by the Jewish people, as our sages taught that HaShem longs to hear the prayers of the righteous²²⁴. Apart from quoting a verse in Yeshayahu²²⁵, the proof is deduced from the fact that Sarah, Rivka and Rachel were not granted children until they had turned to G-d in prayer. While much discussion is centred around this statement, the Kedushas Levi teaches that we learn from this is that although Hashem initiates compassion and grace, He prefers human input, when human beings demonstrate their belief in Him through praying to Him for their needs.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev explains that this is alluded to in the opening verses of Parshas Tazria. We can read the *pasuk* as follows: "when the woman", which our Kabbalists teach describes human beings in their capacity as "recipients", "תזריע", wishes to arouse heavenly compassion, "וילדה זכר", as a result she will give birth, meaning he or she successfully awakens the masculine attribute of Hashem, the source of *rachamim*, of compassion. The Kedushas Levi teaches that the message of the opening

²¹⁹ Vayikra 12:1-2

²²⁰ Kedushas Levi, Vayikra, 12:2, אשה כי תזריע וילדה זכר גו' וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו

²²¹ Vayikra 12:3

²²² Zohar HaKadosh, Part II, 13

²²³ Yoel 2:13

²²⁴ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Yevamos, 64b

²²⁵ Yeshayahu 51:1

pesukim of Parshas Tazria is that when G-d's compassion is awakened through action by His creatures, it is strengthened immeasurably. This concept is reflected in the commandment to do our part in creation, to circumcise the newborn infant already on the eighth day.

Judaism believes that Hashem created a just, fair, and good world. However, the world as we know it is not perfect, nor has it reached its ideal state of *kedushah*. To become perfect and holy, to reach the era of Mashiach, the world requires our actions, our *mitzvos*, our unique missions being fulfilled.

Metzora: The Severity of Lashon HaRa

"וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

בְּזֹאת תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת הַמִּצְוָה בַּיּוֹם טָהַרְתּוּ וְהוֹבֵא אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן:

HaShem spoke to Moshe, saying:

This shall be the ritual for Metzora at the time that he is to be cleansed.

When it has been reported to the priest.²²⁶

Rabbi Menachem Nachum Twersky of Chernobyl, known by the sefer of his teachings published posthumously, the Meor Einayim, brings down the famous teaching of Chazal²²⁷ who interpreted the word *metzora*, one who is afflicted with Tzaraas, as *motzi ra*, one who speaks evil. For, as our sages teach, afflictions come through the sin of evil speech. An example of this association is found at the end of Parshas Beha'alosecha; Miriam speaks against her brother Moshe and is immediately punished with tzaraas. Lashon HaRa, speaking evil, is defined as any derogatory or damaging statement against an individual. The Rambam²²⁸ supplies a litmus test for determining whether something is or isn't lashon hara: Anything which, if it would be publicized, would cause the subject physical or monetary damage, or would cause him anguish or fear, is lashon hara.

The Zohar HaKadosh²²⁹ warns that when one speaks lashon hara, his or her prayers do not go up in front of G-d. The rabbis of the Talmud taught that "evil speech is as great as" the three cardinal sins in Judaism "idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder"²³⁰. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin, the famed Chafetz Chaim, explains this further²³¹ based on the Rishonim. They derived that the reference to the "big three" sins is specifically regarding those who are habituated to lashon hara and who do not take it upon themselves to guard themselves against it, meaning, they act as if it is permitted to them. When one becomes a *Baal Lashon HaRa*, when one regulates himself to evil speech, he or she is denying and going against a law in the Torah, regularly and purposefully.

²²⁶ Vayikra 14:1-2

²²⁷ Me'or Einayim, Vayikra, Metzora, 1

²²⁸ Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Deos, 7:5

²²⁹ Zohar HaKadosh, Part III, 53a

²³⁰ Talmud Bavli, Arachin, 15b

²³¹ Chafetz Chaim, Part One, The Prohibition Against Lashon Hara, Principle 1, Seif 4

As former British Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote²³²: “Through words, words that communicate, words that bind, words that honour the Divine Other and the human other. Lashon hara, “evil speech,” by poisoning language, destroys the very basis of the Judaic vision. When we speak disparagingly of others, we diminish them, we diminish ourselves, and we damage the very ecology of freedom.” The Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch, the Baal HaTanya, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, explains²³³ that people nowadays are no longer afflicted with *tzaraas* since it only occurred when the people were on a higher, more sensitive spiritual level. That being said, the message of *tzaraas* and the severity of lashon hara is very much around and should be recognized.

²³² Covenant and Conversation, The Power of Speech, Metzora, 5779

²³³ Likkutei Torah, Vayikra, 22b

Acharei Mos: Running and Returning

"וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי־יְהוָה וַיָּמָתוּ:"

HaShem spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon who died when they drew too close to the presence of HaShem.²³⁴

Rashi²³⁵ brings a parable from Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah²³⁶. A sick person goes to the doctor. The physician warned him: "Do not eat cold things nor sleep in a damp place!" Another physician came and said to the patient: "Do not eat cold things, nor sleep in a damp place so that you will not die as Mr. So-and-so died!" Certainly, the Midrash explains, the latter warned the patient more. This is why the Torah states that Hashem spoke to Moshe, and told him to speak to Aharon, "after the death of the two sons of Aharon".

What was the sin of Nadav and Avihu? Why does Aharon HaKohen need to be warned? This is answered by many of our sages. One such answer is brought down by Reb Nosson of Nemirov, the primary student of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, in Likutei Halachos²³⁷. Reb Nosson explains that we read these words, the beginning of Parshas Acharei Mos, on Yom Kippur because Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon HaKohen, despite being great Tzaddikim, were only involved in half of Avodas Hashem. They only wanted *deveikus*, to cling to Hashem. They did not realize that in order to serve G-d, there are times of ascent and descent, rising and falling, what Rebbe Nachman of Breslov calls "רצוא ושוב", running and returning²³⁸. On Yom Kippur we read about the dangers that come with running towards Hashem without contemplating our prior actions, without serving G-d in a state of sin, without ever doing *teshuvah* to return to the place we were before sin²³⁹.

Reb Nosson teaches that the reason Aharon was warned right after his two sons passed away, was that Hashem was fearful that Aharon and his descendents would have made the same mistake that Nadav and Avihu made. It was if G-d was saying: Even

²³⁴ Vayikra 16: 1-2

²³⁵ Rashi on Vayikra, 16:1, וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן וּגו'

²³⁶ Sifra, Vayikra, Acharei Mos, Section 1:3

²³⁷ Likutei Halachos, Orach Chaim, Hilchos Shabbos, 7:52:2

²³⁸ Likutei Moharan, Part I, Torah 4; Likutei Moharan, Part I, Torah 13; Likutei Moharan, Part I, Torah 65; Likutei Moharan, Part I, Torah 78; Likutei Moharan, Part I, Torah 79; Likutei Moharan, Part I, Torah 265; Likutei Moharan, Kisvei Yad (Additions from Manuscript), Torah 5; expounded upon throughout Likutei Halachos

²³⁹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Yoma, 86b

though you are Kohanim, even though you are *tzaddikim*, you do not have the right to enter into holiness all the time, (so that you do not become enamoured with running towards Hashem, without ever getting to know yourself, living a life of G-dliness in the physical world.)

As Rav Nasan Maimon, a close student of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld z”l, Executive Director of the Breslov World Center and head of the Breslov Yeshiva’s English-speaking kollel in Jerusalem, explains²⁴⁰, coming close to Hashem is only ultimate goodness when it is done the right way. We must “turn up the volume when we are supposed to, and turn down the volume when we are supposed to”, we must “put our foot on the accelerator when we are supposed to, and put our foot on the brake when we are supposed to.”

The lesson of the first pasuk of Acharei Mos is that awe-inspiring moments, passionate prayers, and the like, are wonderful ways to connect to G-d. However, that is not the only way we can come close to Hashem. Our desire and yearning to cling to G-d is only as great as our ability to serve Him in times of lack of structure, in times of boredom and laziness, and in times when we are in a bad mood²⁴¹.

²⁴⁰ The shiurim of Rav Nasan Maimon on Likutei Halachos, Orach Chaim, Hilchos Shabbos, can be found at <https://www.breslovtorah.com/series/lh3-01-shabbos/>

²⁴¹ As Reb Gedalia Fenster explains, the Kabbalistic concept of *Mochin D’Katnus*, limited consciousness, is simply being in a bad mood or state of mind.

Kedoshim: Different than all the Rest

"וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
דַּבֵּר אֶל־כָּל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדָשִׁים תְּהִיוּ
כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:"

HaShem spoke to Moshe, saying: "Speak to the entirety of Bnei Yisrael and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, HaShem your G-d, am holy."²⁴²

According to the Midrash²⁴³, Hashem commands us to be holy, just like Him, because we descend from Yaakov Avinu. A question is then raised, what does our lineage have to do with the nature of being holy? Simply put, the answer is that we are a "chosen people"²⁴⁴. Anti-semites seem to think that as Jews, we believe that we are favoured in the eyes of G-d and more important to the continuation of the world. However, that is simply not true. We do believe in the notion of "chosenness", but we also know that we are all created equal "*btezlem elokim*"²⁴⁵, in the image of G-d.

Chosenness can be a function of exclusivity or of responsibility. Sometimes something is chosen to the exclusion of everything else. When at a buffet, if I choose only the dessert, I choose it to the exclusion of everything else. Other times what is chosen is merely a responsibility that the chosen may or may not accept. This is the case of someone elected as valedictorian, or asked to speak publicly.

In the Torah, G-d tells Moshe²⁴⁶ that we are His firstborn. All nations are children of G-d, but we are described as the firstborn child. In a family, the firstborn child is not necessarily the recipient of more love, rather his or her role differs. As the oldest in the family, the firstborn is expected to establish direction and be a leader within the family unit. Ultimately chosenness is an opportunity of responsibility, we are given the choice to accept.

The Torah does not explain why G-d chose Avraham Avinu. Though we have some intriguing stories about his childhood, they were not written explicitly in the Torah. They are only known to us through various *Midrashim*. This is an indication of

²⁴² Vayikra 19:1-2

²⁴³ Midrash Tanchuma, Kedoshim, 2

²⁴⁴ Devarim 14:2

²⁴⁵ Bereishis 1:27

²⁴⁶ Shemos 4:22

the idea that there is an element of irrationality and mystery to our chosenness. The Talmud²⁴⁷ and many commentators emphasize that non-Jews not only have a portion in the world to come²⁴⁸, but they have important ideas related to spirituality and life. Though there is major contention to secular influence in religious Judaism, the point is, all people are equal and important and each person has valuable contributions to society.

Anne Frank wrote about the root of antisemitism on April 11, 1944, in her diary: "Who knows -- it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason and that reason alone do we now suffer. We can never become just Netherlands, or just English, or representatives of any other country for that matter. We will always remain Jews." Chosenness as defined by our sages, simply means that as Jews, we have a specific purpose. This specific purpose can simply be defined as making the world a more moral and G-dly place. Thus, as Anne Frank famously wrote, we will always remain Jews, we cannot give up this responsibility of chosenness, the responsibility of continuing the mission of the Jewish people, making the world a more moral and G-dly place.

The Midrash²⁴⁹ expounds on this pasuk that one might think to be holy *like* Hashem but the pasuk says, 'I am holy', which teaches us that "Hashem's *kedushah* is greater than ours." The Satmar Rav, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum explains this Midrash and the distinction between the *kedushah* of Hashem and the *kedushah* of man. Rashi²⁵⁰, based on a Midrash²⁵¹, teaches us that Hashem resides amongst impurity. This is also brought down in the Gemara²⁵² and is quoted by Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin in his sefer Pri Tzadik²⁵³. Says the Satmar Rav, this Midrash means that a person might think that if a person was *mekadesh* himself, he sanctifies himself, he proclaims his holiness, then he can mingle amongst *tumah*, impurity, and not be affected. Reb Yoelish, as he is affectionately known, teaches: "כי קדוש אני", "For I [Hashem] am holy", comes to tell us that the holiness of Hashem and the holiness of man are different. A person has to watch himself so that he will not be influenced by the bad that surrounds him. This is clear from a statement of Rabbi Akiva, who said: "Anyone who clings to sinners, even though they did not do like them, they receive the calamities that befall them and anyone who clings to those who do mitzvos, even if they do not do their good actions,

²⁴⁷ Pesachim 87b

²⁴⁸ Rambam- Hilchos Teshuva 5:3, Hilchos Melachim 8:11

²⁴⁹ Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra, Kedoshim, 24:9

²⁵⁰ Rashi on Vayikra, 16:16, השכן אתם בתוך טומאותם

²⁵¹ Sifra, Acharei Mos, 4:5

²⁵² Talmud Bavli, Maseches Yoma, 56b

²⁵³ Pri Tzadik, Rosh Chodesh Av 1:1

they receive the reward that behooves them.”²⁵⁴ However, G-d is different. Hashem purposefully brings Himself into the lowest, most impure places; yet, His holiness is untainted.

One of many lessons we learn from this pasuk is that as a people, we are unlike everyone else. As Jews, we must stay separate from impurity²⁵⁵, from the vices that pull us down, that drag us through the mud. More than that, we must recognize that we have the inexplicable responsibility of bringing G-d’s light into our physical world.

²⁵⁴ Avos d'Rebbe Nassan 30:3

²⁵⁵ Rashi on Vayikra, 19:1, קדשים תהיו

Emor: Leading with Inspiration and Education

"וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל-הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם לִנְפֹשׁ לֹא-יִטְמָא בְּעַמִּיּוֹ:"

HaShem said to Moshe: "Speak to the Kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and say to them: None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin."²⁵⁶

Rashi²⁵⁷, based on a Gemara²⁵⁸ teaches that the seemingly superfluous words "אמר אל הכהנים", "speak to the Kohanim", and "ואמרת אליהם", "say to them", is intended to admonish the adults about their children also, that they should teach them to avoid contracting *tumah*, to avoid becoming impure.

The Yismach Moshe, Rav Moshe Teitelbaum, the father of the Chassidic movement in Hungary and of Satmar Chassidus, founded by his descendant, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum, explained that there is still more to decipher²⁵⁹. Firstly, the statement of our sages, brought down by Rashi, based on a statement of the Talmud, is the *pshat*, the simple meaning of the pasuk. What is the deeper meaning of this teaching? Secondly, we know that the Kohanim were the sons of Aharon. Why did the Torah specify this? The third question is on the word "אליהם", to them. Why is it necessary to specify that he should "say to them." Lastly, we need to explain the comment of the Alshich²⁶⁰, who pointed out that the pasuk uses the word "לנפש", "for the soul", instead of "למת", "for one who died." The Yismach Moshe answers all these questions by explaining the need to understand the concept of "טומאת מת", ritual impurity from death. When it comes to the death of people, every person and thing in the shelter where a person dies becomes ritually impure. However, in regards to animals, only one who comes into contact with the dead carcass becomes impure. This seems to answer the fourth question quite nicely. Yet, it seemingly leaves the first three unanswered.

If we delve deeper, we can see that all our questions were answered. When we strive only to affect those we come into contact with, we are like animals. When we have a mission, a purpose, a drive to impact others, then we are considered people. The

²⁵⁶ Vayikra 21:1

²⁵⁷ Rashi on Vayikra, 21:1, אמר אל הכהנים

²⁵⁸ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Yevamos, 114a

²⁵⁹ Yismach Moshe, Vayikra, Emor, 2

²⁶⁰ Alshich al HaTorah, Vayikra, Emor, 21:1,1-3

Talmud²⁶¹ teaches that every person must say, "The world was created just for me." Rav Noach Weinberg, the saintly founder and Rosh Yeshiva of Aish HaTorah used to say "[t]hat means each of us is responsible for the entire world." A *tzaddik* of our generation, Rav Avraham Tzvi Kluger teaches, "[t]he Torah makes no distinction between our *avodah* and the responsibility of *chinuch*, [education], on the contrary, it's all the same topic,"²⁶².

The need to specify that the Kohanim were the sons of Aharon is now quite clear. While it is important to be a positive role model and impact all those around us, the main focus of *chinuch* is the relaying of values from parent to child, from generation to generation. As Rav Kluger teaches²⁶³: "They ask and we explain to them why we are doing these things. Our job is to share our truth with our children." This also answers the need for the word "אליהם". Successful *chinuch* is only when you speak directly to the person, that is, when you understand who they are and attempt to educate them accordingly. This is spelled out clearly in a pasuk in Mishlei²⁶⁴. We recognize that each and every person has their own abilities, "everyone's temperament and personal strengths are not the same,"²⁶⁵. More than that, the Piacenza Rebbe, Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, stressed the fact that "education is not only commands... So too is it not just habit, that one accustoms his son or student to good deeds. Education is far, far beyond commands or habit, and these two things, commands and habit, are simply tools used in its implementation which the educator is forced to use, to command or to habituate, in order to educate,"²⁶⁶.

While the opening of Parshas Emor was seemingly only a command for Moshe to tell his brother Aharon about the laws of Kohanim and ritual purity, we know that the Torah is eternal and its message is eternal. Ultimately, based on the words of the Yismach Moshe, this pasuk teaches us how to be a leader, how to inspire others, and how to educate future generations.

²⁶¹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Sanhedrin, 37a

²⁶² My Sole Desire, Feldheim, pg. 299

²⁶³ *ibid.*

²⁶⁴ Mishlei 22:6

²⁶⁵ Divrei Shalom v'Emes 1:1

²⁶⁶ Chovas HaTalmidim, Introduction/Hakdamah

Behar: Joy from Hardship

"וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינִי לֵאמֹר:
דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנִי
נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשָׁבַתָּה הָאָרֶץ שַׁבַּת לַיהוָה:"

HaShem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai:

Speak to Bnei Yisrael people and say to them: "When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of HaShem."²⁶⁷

Parshas Behar opens with G-d telling Moshe at Har Sinai to speak to the Jewish people and teach them about the laws of *Shemittah*, the Sabbatical year. Every seven years, the Jewish people would take a year off, refraining from working the land. As well, in the *Shemittah* year, all debts were cancelled. Rashi asks a pertinent question²⁶⁸. What does the Sabbatical year have to do with Har Sinai that the Torah felt compelled to expressly state where this law was commanded? Rashi recalls that in fact, all *mitzvos*, the general rules and their specific details were ordained on Mount Sinai! Therefore, he brings the following idea. Since we do not find the law of *Shemittah* repeated in "the fields of Moav"²⁶⁹, when Moshe repeated almost all of the commandments contained throughout the Torah, we can infer that all the laws pertaining to the Sabbatical year, both general rules and specific prescriptions must have been taught to the nation at Sinai. The seemingly superfluous words of "בהר סיני" teaches us that everything in Torah originated at Har Sinai and that they were only repeated again in "the fields of Moav".

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, in his sefer, the Maor V'Shemesh, writes that the question of Rashi still stands²⁷⁰. As well, he questions the language of the pasuk "ושבתה הארץ", "the land shall observe a sabbath." Says the Maor V'Shemesh, the land is not what is working or not, it is the people that are sowing, pruning, planting, etc. Even so, when people stop working the land, it is still constantly growing. The Mei HaShiloach, written by Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz answers this question²⁷¹. The word "ארץ", "land", hints at the heart²⁷². Hashem promised that when the Jewish people enter the Land of Israel their hearts will be calmed, they will be in a state of inner peace.

²⁶⁷ Vayikra 25:1-2

²⁶⁸ Rashi on Vayikra, 25:1, בהר סיני

²⁶⁹ Devarim 34:1

²⁷⁰ This is beyond the scope of this d'var torah

²⁷¹ Mei HaShiloach, Volume I, Vayikra, Behar 1

²⁷² This is supported by Rashi on Bamidbar, 15:39, ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם

This seems to make no sense at all. For Bnei Yisrael, the path to entering Eretz Yisrael was filled with war and hardship. Simply put, the reason that the Jewish people could settle down and find inner peace was because of the trials and tribulations. The Mesillas Yesharim writes²⁷³: “[M]an is truly placed in the midst of a raging battlefield. For all matters of this world, whether for the good or for the bad, are trials for man.” These trials, should we choose to overcome them, can bring us great serenity and joy. Rav Itamar Schwartz teaches that “if one is being prevented or opposed, and one overcomes the opposition, the result is that there will be greater actualization of potential, because there was more effort involved. Increasing one’s efforts, in order to get to the actualization of anything, is also a factor that increases joy,”²⁷⁴. When we fight for what is right, when we earn our fair share, then the reward is that much sweeter.

²⁷³ Mesillas Yesharim, 1:8

²⁷⁴ Upgrading Your Simcha [Joy from the Four Elements], pg. 19

Bechukosai: The Thought that Counts

"אם-בְּחֻקָּי תֵּלְכוּ וְאֶת-מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם:"

"If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments."²⁷⁵

Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev in his sefer, Kedushas Levi, points out that at first glance this entire pasuk seems unnecessary. The Torah simply should have begun with the next verse: "אם תשמרו את מצוותי ונתתי גשמיכם בעתו", "if you will observe My commandments I will provide your rainfall at the appropriate time,"²⁷⁶.

The Berditchever understands a statement of our sages²⁷⁷ that Hashem will account a good intention as if it were a good deed, meaning that the good intention is already accounted as fulfillment of a mitzvah. This fits nicely with the Gemara in Maseches Megillah²⁷⁸ which teaches us that the learning of the *halachos*, the laws of the sacrificial offerings, serves as an actual fulfillment of the mitzvah we "once had",²⁷⁹.

Explains the Kedushas Levi, when a person fulfills a mitzvah, truly without any ulterior motives, this can result in such a person being transported to a higher spiritual level. As a result of such a spiritual "promotion," one will be granted the opportunity to fulfill still other mitzvos. This is how Rav Levi Yitzchak understands the statements of our sages²⁸⁰ "שכר מצוה, מצוה", that the reward of fulfilling a mitzvah is another mitzvah, and "מצוה גוררת מצוה", the performance of one commandment leads to another. Keeping this in mind the Berditchever explains the famous line quoted in the name of Tanna devei Eliyahu that every person who studies multiple *halachos* daily, is assured that he or she will have a share in Olam HaBa, in the World-to-Come. The meaning is that an individual will progress daily ever closer to his ultimate objective, to get closer to Hashem.

Teaches the Kedushas Levi, the words: "אם בחוקותי תלכו", mean that "if you follow My laws," you will be considered as walking on the right path. The words "ואת מצותי תשמרו", refer to learning, contemplating, planning of performing mitzvos.

²⁷⁵ Vayikra 26:3

²⁷⁶ Vayikra 26:4

²⁷⁷ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Kiddushin, 40a

²⁷⁸ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Megillah, 31b

²⁷⁹ See Beit Yosef, Orach Chaim 48:1:1 where R. Yosef Karo codifies the recitation of the verses pertaining to the Korbanos

²⁸⁰ Avos 4:2

“ועשיתם אותם” means that even if you have not succeeded for some reason to carry out your good intention, Hashem considers it as if you had done it. When understood in this manner, none of the words in the *pasuk* are superfluous or repetitious. In fact, this *pasuk* and the understanding of the Berditchever is crucial to our understanding what it means to live according to *halacha*, and empowers us to serve Hashem in not simply in deeds, but in our thoughts as well²⁸¹.

²⁸¹ As Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches that “in all things and in all thoughts, even a sinful thought, word or deed, Heaven forbid, the Torah is en clothed there as well, albeit in a most hidden and concealed manner,” (Likutei Moharan, Torah 56:3).

Bamidbar: Ultimately a Love Story

"וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי בְּאֶהָל מוֹעֵד בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי
בַּשָּׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית לִיצְאָתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר:"

On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, HaShem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying:²⁸²

“The purpose of Torah is life; to teach, inform, and guide us along life’s journeys, as individuals, and as a nation. In every era, as a nation, we can look to the events of *dor hamidbar*, the generation of the desert, for insight, guidance, and inspiration relevant to what is taking place in the present. As an example, Balak and Sichon sought to destroy the Jewish people. From those events, we can learn how to deal with those throughout history that attempt to destroy us. The general guiding principle is this: the book of Bamidbar is not just a description of the nation’s journeys in the desert, it’s a description of the spiritual infrastructure of the nation,”²⁸³. As Rav Reuven Sasson, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Ramat HaSharon teaches, the story of the Jewish people wandering in the desert is applicable to the here and now, to the present moment. This is compounded by the words of the Nesivos Shalom²⁸⁴. Explains the Nesivos Shalom, the Jewish people do not simply commemorate world history and recall the past, every holiday, every custom, every ritual is directly connected to our present and our future, both on an individual level and a national level.

The Midrash teaches that “all are blind until HaKadosh Baruch Hu opens their eyes,”²⁸⁵. Rav Zev Leff, the rabbi of Moshav Matityahu, explained further: “When we view the world through our own eyes we are subject to our material desires and the distorting effects of passion and bias. Only when we let the Torah mold our thought processes can we view the world in its true perspective,”²⁸⁶. As beautiful an idea as it is, in reality this idea is shaky at best. The generation of the desert grew up with stories of the Exodus from Egypt, of the ten plagues and of *Krias Yam Suf*. They experienced the miraculous food and drink. They saw the awesome military victories. Hashem opened their eyes! Yet, in the desert the Jews complained about everything. The lack of water,

²⁸² Bamidbar 1:1

²⁸³ Bamidbar: The Journey, Rav Reuven Sasson, Machon Mala’eh Ha’aretz De’ah

²⁸⁴ Nesivos Shalom al HaTorah, Bamidbar, Bein HaMeitzarim, The Meaning of Mourning, Yearning, and Longing, pg 190

²⁸⁵ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis, 53:14

²⁸⁶ Outlooks and Insights on the the Weekly Torah Portion, Parshas Bamidbar

the lack of meat, the harshness of the Land of Israel, and above all Moshe's leadership. Even after G-d opened their eyes, it seems like the Jewish people were still blind, so-to-speak.

The Ramban²⁸⁷ in Bereishis, in his explanation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil explains that it could have been perceived as both. In Kabbalah, this concept is found in what is called the *Klipas Nogah*, an aspect of the forces of negativity that conceals G-d's light that can be inducted to the service of good. The Jewish people were not "blind". They saw everything, both good and bad. They simply chose to focus on the negative. Instead of focusing on the revelation of G-dliness that was so apparent, they chose to complain about the darkness, the concealment, the few things that they were lacking. In our day, most people in North America and Israel have the basic necessities of food, shelter, education, etc. Yet, we still complain about our trials and tribulations, which compared to previous generations, are virtually nonexistent.

Like the Jewish people in the desert, each of us is surrounded with the evidence of Hashem's love and care. We're alive. We can think, speak, move, breath, see, hear. But we're still filled with bitterness for things we don't have. In essence, the simple lesson of all of Sefer Bamidbar is that we have the ability and obligation to look past the momentary difficulty and to see the good in every situation. However, it is more than that. Rav Tzaddok HaKohen of Lublin in Tzidkas HaTzadik²⁸⁸, explaining the pasuk in Tehillim "גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיא צִלְמוֹת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי", "Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You [Hashem] are with me,"²⁸⁹ teaches that no matter our actions, Hashem's love never leaves us. This is shown by the fact that even when we are actively rebelling and going against His will, G-d still sustains us, enabling us to sin against Him.

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, in the Mei HaShiloach taught²⁹⁰ that when a Jew falls, he falls right into the arms of Hashem. Sefer Bamidbar shows that no matter how low a person falls, no matter how distant a person feels, they are still called a Jew²⁹¹. It is the story of an unsteady relationship, how we, the Jewish people, followed Hashem lovingly into the wilderness²⁹², how we strayed from that love, and how Hashem never relinquished that love.

²⁸⁷ Ramban on Bereishis, 2:9, ועץ החיים בתוך הגן ועץ הדעת טוב ורע

²⁸⁸ Tzidkas HaTzadik 242

²⁸⁹ Tehillim 23:4

²⁹⁰ Mei HaShiloach, Likutei Mei HaShiloach, Kesuvim, Tehillim, Chapter 23;

Pri Tzaddik, Nasso, 15

²⁹¹ Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin, 44a

²⁹² Yirmeyahu 2:2

Naso: We Have Infinite Potential

"וַיִּדְבֹר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

נָשָׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן גַּם־הֵם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם:

HaShem spoke to Moshe:

“Take a census of the Gershonites also, by their ancestral house and by their clans.”²⁹³

Former British Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, wrote²⁹⁴: “The word Naso that gives its name to this week's parsha is a verb of an extraordinary range of meanings, among them: to lift, to carry, and to forgive. Here though, and elsewhere in the wilderness years, it is used, in conjunction with the phrase *et rosh* ("the head") to mean "to count." This is an odd way of speaking, because biblical Hebrew is not short of other verbs meaning to count, among them *limnot*, *lispor*, *lifkod*, and *lachshov*. Why then not use one of these verbs? Why not simply say "count" instead of "lift the head"?".

“The answer”, Rabbi Sacks brings, “takes us into one of the most revolutionary of all Jewish beliefs.” Says the former Chief Rabbi, one of our generation’s top theologians, “if we are each in the image of G-d, then every one of us has infinite value. We are each unique.” This somewhat helps to explain a peculiar statement of the Rabbi Yosef Chaim, the famed Ben Ish Chai, in his commentary on the Torah, the Aderes Eliyahu²⁹⁵ that this pasuk hints to the sparks of holiness that were exiled from their original place that fell and were clarified and elevated up to their root above, meaning taking the sparks of holiness of the later generation and taking it specifically to the place of our saintly ancestors.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos teaches²⁹⁶: “Beloved is man for he was created in the image [of G-d]. Especially beloved is he for it was made known to him that he had been created in the image [of G-d], as it is said: “for in the image of G-d He made man”²⁹⁷. Our sages teach us that we are a *tzel*, a shade of G-d, because just like Hashem is one, we are one. There is only one of us. Each and every single one of us are unique and are

²⁹³ Bamidbar 4:21-22

²⁹⁴ Lifting Heads, Covenant & Conversation, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

²⁹⁵ Aderes Eliyahu, Bamidbar, Nasso 1

²⁹⁶ Avos 3:14

²⁹⁷ Bereishis 9:6

special. This is amplified by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov who emphasized²⁹⁸ acknowledging that no two people are alike.

In recent years, there has been a steady stream of Torah resources dedicated to self-knowledge²⁹⁹. All these can be summed up with the following line³⁰⁰ of Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, the famed Mashgiach of the Ponevezh Yeshiva. “A person may come to know themselves in three ways: In their aloneness; when they are giving as opposed to taking; when they yearn to be instead of yearning towards acquirement.” While there is not nearly enough paper in the world to write about this profound statement, it is worth contemplating.

We are all unique. We have to strive to be the greatest we can be, to tap into the greatness, the power within. To simply count us is inadequate, because we are not just one person, we have infinite potential.

²⁹⁸ Likutei Moharan, Volume I, Torah 25

²⁹⁹ One such example is the writings of Rabbi Itamar Schwartz, an Israeli rabbi and marbitz torah known for his sefarim Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh and the Da Es Atzmecha/Nafshecha/etc. series, which has been translated into English as Getting to Know Your... Self/Soul/etc.

³⁰⁰ Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Chelek Daled

Behaalosecha: The Power of Desire

"וַיֹּדֶבֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהִעָלְתָּךְ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל־מִזְבֵּחַ
פְּנֵי הַמִּנְחָה יֹאירוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת:"

HaShem spoke to Moshe, saying:

“Speak to Aharon and say to him, When you mount the lamps, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lampstand.”³⁰¹

Rashi poses an interesting question; which he then answers³⁰². Why is the section dealing with the lighting of the Menorah juxtaposed with the section dealing with the offerings brought by the *nesi'im*, the leaders of the tribes, at the end of Parshas Naso? Because when Aharon saw the dedication offerings of the *nesi'im*, he felt distressed because neither he nor his tribe was with them in the dedication. Therefore, Hashem reassured him that his portion is greater than the *nesi'im*, for he is to light the Menorah. A few interesting lessons can be learned from this statement.

From this Rashi, we see the humanity of Aharon HaKohen. Even he, a leader of the Jewish people, someone on such a spiritual level, was worried that Hashem did not need him, that his purpose had been achieved, that there was no need for him. Yet, it was specifically then that G-d granted him the mitzvah of kindling the Menorah, reassuring him that not only can he, but he is obligated to light up the world, constantly³⁰³. No matter how one may feel, the fact of the matter is that to exist, to be created, to be born, to be alive, means Hashem believes in you. You still have a mission that you need to accomplish. A purpose that is unique to you.

This understanding of the message of Rashi fits well with the teaching of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov³⁰⁴, one of the founders of the Chassidic movement in Poland. Explains Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov, based on the pasuk in Mishlei that the light of Hashem is the life, the soul of man, “נֵר ה' נִשְׁמַת אָדָם”³⁰⁵, that we can understand the pasuk in the following way: “When you will want to elevate the *neshamos*, the souls of the Jewish people, it will be when you elevate the lights of the Menorah.”

³⁰¹ Bamidbar 8:1-2

³⁰² Rashi on Bamidbar, 8:2, בהעלתך

³⁰³ See Tetzaveh: Hishtadlus and the Menorah for more on the constant nature of the Menorah

³⁰⁴ Divrei Menachem, Pninei HaTorah, Behaalosecha

³⁰⁵ Mishlei 20:27

As discussed earlier³⁰⁶, the *avodah*, the service of the Menorah, was simply to express our love for Hashem, to put forward our best effort. Recognizing this is the key to understanding both the statement of Rashi and the teaching of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov. Rashi writes that Hashem reassured Aharon that his portion was greater than that of the *nesi'im*. Why is that so? Because, the *nesi'im* gave from themselves on behalf of their tribes. They believed that their Korban was enough, it showed their love for Hashem. However, it was just a present, likened to the exchange of gifts between *Chassan* and *Kallah*, bride and groom, in the *Yichud* room after the Chuppah. It was an expression of great love, but it did not encapsulate the essence of the relationship. Aharon HaKohen, when he lit the Menorah, did not simply give of himself, rather it was his best effort, an expression of his desire, his yearning to come closer to Hashem.

As Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches: “The Godliness in a Jewish heart is the aspect of *ein sof*, the infinite light of Hashem... There is no end or limit to its yearning,”³⁰⁷. This explains why Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov taught that the elevation of the souls of the Jewish people comes from the lighting of the Menorah. The pasuk in Koheles³⁰⁸ teaches that there is not one righteous person on earth who does only good, and does not sin. Though we battle constantly to be more spiritual, to only do what is right, to connect to, come close to, and cling to Hashem, we can only do so much to elevate ourselves. We still have a *Yetzer HaRa*. We still have challenges and obstacles that get in our way. By lighting the Menorah, Aharon was putting forth his best effort in the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people; it was then up to G-d to reciprocate.

³⁰⁶ See Tetzaveh: Hishtadlus and the Menorah

³⁰⁷ Likutei Moharan, Volume I, Torah 49:4

³⁰⁸ Koheles 7:20

Shelach: The Gravity of the Sin of the Spies and its Connection to the Sin of Miriam

"וַיִּדְבֹּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

שְׁלַח־לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיְתִירוּ אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר־אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ
אֶחָד אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמִטָּה אֲבֹתָיו תִּשְׁלָחוּ כָּל נָשִׂיא בָהֶם:

“HaShem spoke to Moshe, saying,:

Send men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to Bnei Yisrael people; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chief among them.”³⁰⁹

Although chronologically the episode of Miriam being afflicted with *tzara’as* at the end of the previous parsha preceded the affair of the spies in Parshas Shelach, we know that "the Torah's events were not recorded in chronological order,"³¹⁰. Therefore, our sages ask: "Why is the section of the spies adjoined to the section of Miriam?" The answer brought down by Rashi, based on a Midrash³¹¹, is that these two narratives are written one after the other “because she [Miriam] had been punished for evil talk, which she had spoken against her brother, and these wicked people saw and did not learn a lesson,”³¹².

Still, the question remains, how is the sin of Lashon HaRa that Miriam transgressed similar to the sin of the spies' negative comments about Eretz Yisrael? Rav Joseph B. (Yosef Dov Ber) Soloveitchik “suggested that the significance of Miriam’s sin was not that she spoke lashon hara per se, but that she didn’t appreciate the “*segulah* quality,” the uniqueness of Moshe,”³¹³. While there were, of course, other *nevi'im*, other prophets, both before and after Moshe, the Rambam³¹⁴ explains that Moshe’s prophecy was unique and qualitatively different than that of all other prophets³¹⁵. So too, the Land of Israel is unique and qualitatively different from all other lands. In fact, its holiness

³⁰⁹ Bamidbar 13:1-2

³¹⁰ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Pesachim, 6b

³¹¹ Midrash Tanchuma, Shelach 5

³¹² Rashi on Bamidbar, 13:2, שלח לך אנשים

³¹³ YUTorah In Print, Shelach, 5774, Miriam and the Meraglim by Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

³¹⁴ Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, 7:6

³¹⁵ As evidenced by Bamidbar 12:7

and spiritual nature is impossible to identify rationally³¹⁶. The essence of the mistake of the spies, “explained Rav Soloveitchik, was that they viewed the land only as a political entity and they completely missed the singular, *segulah* quality of Eretz Yisrael; “With grandeur looking down at them all they could see was the mundane,””³¹⁷.

As discussed earlier³¹⁸, the Jewish people had lost all perspective. Despite the clear revelation of Hashem, they still only saw the negative, and the hardships. The first slonimer rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Weinberg of Slonim, in his sefer the Yesod HaAvodah explained the pasuk, “רק אין דבר ברגלי אעבר”³¹⁹, translated as “it is really not a big deal, we ask only for passage on foot” in the following way: “רק אין דבר”, there is nothing greater, than “ברגלי אעבר”, when one overcomes his *ragilus*, his habits³²⁰.

As the Lubavitcher Rebbe teaches: “If you see what needs to be repaired and how to repair it, then you have found a piece of the world that G-d has left for you to complete. But if you only see what is wrong and how ugly it is, then it is you yourself that needs repair,”³²¹. This is echoed by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook who writes: “The pure righteous people do not complain about evil but rather they add justice; they do not complain about heresy but rather they add faith; they do not complain about ignorance but rather they add wisdom,”³²². When we open our eyes to the world around us, when we alter our perspective, when we grow, when we change who we are, when we see how we can fix the *tzebrachenkeit*, the brokenness of the world around us, then we are doing our life’s work. However, when we only focus on the negative, when we speak about the destruction and suffering in the world without offering a solution, then we deserve to be punished, as a way of altering ourselves.

Besides from understanding the deep connection between the sins of Miriam and the spies, we can also now understand the gravity of the sins themselves. As Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches: “If you believe it is possible to destroy, believe it is possible to repair!,”³²³. In both instances they looked passed the uniquely holy and G-dly ordained. They saw only the bad and brokenness, without believing they could repair the broken relationship³²⁴ or succeed in conquering the land³²⁵, respectively. These sins

³¹⁶ Orot, Orot Me’Ofel, Eretz Yisrael, 1:2

³¹⁷ YUTorah In Print, Shelach, 5774, Miriam and the Meraglim by Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

³¹⁸ See Bamidbar: Ultimately a Love Story

³¹⁹ Bamidbar 20:19

³²⁰ Brought down by Rabbi Elimelech Biderman in Torah Wellsprings, 5776, Parshas Shelach

³²¹ Likutei Sichos, Vol. 10, pg. 25

³²² Arpelei Tohar, page 39

³²³ Likutei Moharan, Part II, Torah 112:1

³²⁴ Rashi on Bamidbar, 12:1, על אדות האשה

³²⁵ Bamidbar 13:30

questioned the foundations of Jewish belief. “Without an acceptance of Moshe’s uniqueness, the authority of his prophecy, and of the Torah itself, is compromised... Without an appreciation for the singularity of Eretz Yisrael, the holiness and spiritual potential of the land can never be realized,”³²⁶.

³²⁶ YUTorah In Print, Shelach, 5774, Miriam and the Meraglim by Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

Korach: Seeing Clearly

"וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח בֶּן-יִצְחָר בֶּן-קֵהָת בֶּן-לֵוִי וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב וְאוֹן בֶּן-פֹּלֵת בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן:
וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַנְשִׁים מִבְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים וּמָאתַיִם נָשִׂאִי עֵדָה קָרְאִי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי-שָׁם:"

Now Korach, son of Itzhar son of Kehat son of Levi, took himself, along with Datan and Aviram sons of Eliav, and On son of Pelet, descendants of Reuven: to rise up against Moshe, together with two hundred and fifty Bnei Yisrael, chiefs of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute.³²⁷

There is one question that bothers me every year when we reach Parshas Korach. How is it that Korach and his followers rebelled against Moshe? Did they not see that he was G-d's appointed messenger throughout the ten plagues and the splitting of the sea!? Did they not see that Moshe spoke to Hashem, that he received the Torah and was tasked with transmitting it? These questions, which gnaw at me every year when we get to Parshas Korach is compounded by a statement of the Rambam³²⁸. Explains the Rambam, the pasuk "וְגַם בְּרַחֲמֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם", "and so [the people will] believe in you forever"³²⁹, is a guarantee that anyone whose ancestors stood by Har Sinai will not become a non-believer. If someone does become a *kofer*, an apostate, asserts the Rambam, it must be that his ancestors were not by Har Sinai.

If it had been the great, great, great grandchildren of Korach we would have had a *kashya*, a question on the Rambam. Korach and his followers were themselves present at Ma'amad Har Sinai! How could the Rambam say that anyone whose ancestors were there is guaranteed that he won't fall into *kefirah* if those who were present at Matan Torah rebelled against Hashem and Moshe? This very question was asked to the Steipler Gaon, the saintly Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, by Rav Moshe Mordechai Shulsinger, the rabbi of Beis Medrash Yarchei Kallah in Bnei Brak, the author of the acclaimed seforim Mishmar Halevi, and one of the gedolei Torah of Eretz Yisrael.

"The Steipler answered him as follows: What the Rambam is saying is that someone whose ancestors stood by Har Sinai will not one morning wake up and out of nowhere become an atheist. However, if a person becomes mired in sin, that could cause him to lose his clarity of understanding... Likewise, if a person doesn't have a

³²⁷ Bamidbar 16:1-2

³²⁸ Igros HaRambam, Iggeres Teiman

³²⁹ Shemos 19:9

handle on his negative middos, it is possible that they could lead him astray to the point of *kefirah*... The guarantee was not given... with Korach, because he was drawn into the terrible middah of jealousy over the appointment of his cousin”³³⁰, Moshe Rabbeinu.

The Arizal, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, taught that the final letters of the words ”צדיק כתמר יפרח”, “the righteous bloom like a date-palm”³³¹, spell Korach, because in the future, Korach will blossom and become from the greatest tzaddikim³³². “Indeed, before his sin, Korach was from the greatest people of the generation. A proof to this is that he was appointed to carry the Aron. Only the greatest people in Klal Yisrael were given this right,”³³³. The Divrei Shmuel, Rabbi Shmuel Weinberg of Slonim, famously said: “Whoever has the potential to fall very low has the potential to rise very high.” As Rabbi Moshe Twersky, an incredible *talmid chacham* and *maggid shiur* who was killed *al Kiddush Hashem* in the 2014 Synagogue massacre in the Har Nof neighbourhood of Jerusalem remarked, “If a person is wearing purple-stained glasses, then everything he sees is going to look purple.” Korach was so blinded by jealousy that he simply ignored the evidence before him that proved that Moshe Rabbeinu was the rightful leader of the Jewish people. Plagued with jealousy, Korach the great *tzaddik* was able to fall so very low, all the way into the ground³³⁴.

Though the main lesson of Parshas Korach is to distance ourselves from *machlokes*, from arguments and strife, another lesson emerges. That is the lesson of *tikkun hamiddos*, fixing one’s character traits. As the Vilna Gaon explains, “everyone was created uniquely and with a variation of different *middos*,”³³⁵. This is evidence of the fact that each and every person “has many innate tendencies which differ one from the other,”³³⁶. The Ramchal teaches that acknowledging one’s traits, strengths and weaknesses alike, is crucial in being able to begin one’s journey in perfecting one’s *middos*³³⁷. Let’s start with Korach. Jealousy clearly brought him down, destroying his spiritual stature. As quoted earlier³³⁸, the Mishnah³³⁹ in Pirkei Avos teaches us that jealousy is among three *middos* that drive us from this world. However, like all “bad” *middos* sometimes jealousy can be used for a positive goal. One such example is brought

³³⁰ Vayigdal Moshe, 5776, Korach

³³¹ Tehillim 92:13

³³² Pri Etz Chaim, Shaar Hanhagas HaLimmud, 1:82

³³³ Torah Wellsprings, 5776, Korach

³³⁴ Bamidbar 16:32

³³⁵ Even Shelemah 1:7

³³⁶ Mishneh Torah, Hilchos De’os, 1:1

³³⁷ Mesillas Yesharim, chapter 3

³³⁸ See Bereishis: Prerequisites for Mitzvos for more on middos

³³⁹ Avos 4:21

down in the Gemara³⁴⁰, which teaches us "קנאת סופרים תרבה חכמה", the envy of Torah scholars increases wisdom. Unlike Korach, it is up to each and everyone of us to take off our “purple-stained glasses”, to see the world in its true colours, to see ourselves for who we really are, so that we can take advantage of every moment, opportunity, and situation we find ourselves in.

³⁴⁰ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Bava Basra, 22a

Chukas: Faith Above All

וַיִּדְבֹר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְהוָה לֵאמֹר דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָרָה אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין־בָּהּ מוּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֹל:”

HaShem spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying: “This is the ritual law that HaShem has commanded- Instruct Bnei Yisrael people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid.”³⁴¹

All our sages explain that we do not know why Hashem commanded us with the mitzvah of the *parah adumah*. Yet, “we keep it anyway with love because it is Hashem's will. We don't keep the mitzvos because we understand why the mitzvos are good for us, but because we are loyal to Hashem's command,”³⁴².

The Torah says, “זאת חקת התורה אשר-צוה ה' לאמר”, “this is the *chok* [the mitzvah that we do not understand the reason for] of the Torah that HaShem has commanded”. A question can be raised: Why does it say “חוקת התורה”, when it could have said “חוקת הפרה”, the *chok* of the Parah Adumah, or “חוקת הטהרה”, the *chok* of purity. The Or HaChaim HaKadosh, Rabbi Chaim Ibn Attar, answers this question³⁴³. It says “חקת התורה” to hint that if the Jewish people will keep this seemingly incomprehensible mitzvah, although it is a *chok*, a mitzvah we do not understand and would not come to rationally, it is considered as though they kept the entire Torah “אשר-צוה ה' לאמר”, that Hashem commanded, because keeping a mitzvah without [knowing the] reason shows man's *emunah*, and his desire to keep all of the mitzvos. In essence the Or HaChaim HaKadosh is teaching that we should approach all the laws in the Torah the way we approach the Parah Adumah.

This *d'var Torah* has already become a little unsettling. Is the goal of *Avodas Hashem* to do mitzvos, to simply blindly follow the Shulchan Aruch, without understanding the reasons behind what we are doing? Of course not! We can and should understand the statement of the Or HaChaim in the following way: “For any particular mitzvah, we can, and should, try to understand its purpose or purposes, as well as we

³⁴¹ Bamidbar 19:1-2

³⁴² Torah Wellsprings, 5776, Chukas

³⁴³ Or HaChaim on Bamidbar, 19:2, זאת חקת התורה

can, and we may succeed in this to a greater or lesser extent, and decide that the mitzvah makes good sense or whatever; but ultimately, the reason we should perform any mitzvah is because G-d commanded us to. The fact that we understand the mitzvos should not detract from the fact that we are performing it because G-d said so. It is in this sense that we should treat all mitzvos like that of the red *heifer*,³⁴⁴.

This is certainly the understanding of the Saba Kadisha of Slonim, Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin. While his response to the question answered by the Or HaChaim HaKadosh, the message is the same. Teaches the Saba Kadisha of Slonim³⁴⁵, the mitzvah of the red *heifer* is called “חוקת התורה” because the Torah is just like the Parah Adumah in the sense that it makes those who were pure, impure, and causes those that were once impure to become pure. For if a person learns Torah not for its own sake, [for the sake of Hashem], and he or she is in a state of *tumah*, ritual impurity, the Torah learning will purify them. However if a person is in a state of *taharah*, of holiness and purity, and he or she learns Torah not for its own sake, they will lower themselves and the power of the *Yetzer HaRa* will take hold. Besides for its literal implication of this teaching³⁴⁶, the point that Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin drives home can be explained in the language of the land. What once was a great accomplishment would be a terrible downfall for a person later on in life.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches: “Even the simplest of people unable to learn Torah at all, or a person who is in a place where it is impossible for him to learn, and the like, even so, also at the time of his simplicity he has to strengthen himself with fear of G-d and simple faith according to his level,”³⁴⁷. While intellectual pursuits are important, Torah learning that is not a vehicle for connecting to Hashem has no value. One of the many messages of the Parah Adumah, as relayed by Rabbi Chaim Ibn Attar and Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin is that one has to cling to Hashem, to live with faith, each person according to his or her own level.

³⁴⁴ Meoros HaTzadikim, 5776, Chukas

³⁴⁵ Imros Moshe, Parshas Parah, pg. 69

³⁴⁶ Which is beyond the scope of this D'var Torah

³⁴⁷ Likutei Moharan, Part II, Torah 78:7

Balak: The Power of Torah and Tefillah

"וַיֵּרָא בָלָק בֶּן־צִפּוֹר אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֻמּוֹת"

“Balak son of Tzippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.”³⁴⁸

The saintly Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam, pointed out that the first question we must ask is, “what did Balak see?”³⁴⁹. At first, this question seems silly. The Torah tells us, in general terms, what Balak saw. However, Rashi himself thought about this question! Explains Rashi³⁵⁰, Balak saw the miraculous victories of the Jewish people over the two kings, Sichon and Og. He recognized that if the Jewish people could defeat Sichon and Og, on whom he relied upon³⁵¹, how much less can he and his nation, the people of Moav do so.

The Trisker Maggid, Rabbi Avraham of Triskin, in his sefer Magen Avraham³⁵², explains that “אמרי” means speech and prayers. Balak saw that the Jewish nation has the ability to pray, and Hashem listens to them. This frightened him. The Noam Elimelech, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk in his sefer also teaches this lesson³⁵³. He writes, based on a statement of our sages³⁵⁴, that “Balak understood that the Jewish people can accomplish whatever they desire with words.” This is the meaning of the words, “וירא”, he understood, “את כל אשר עשה ישראל”, all that the Jewish people accomplished, “לאמרי”, with their prayers.

As beautiful of an idea as it is, it is slightly puzzling. How did the Chassidic masters move so far away from the *pshat* explained by Rashi? Rabbi Shmuel Brazil, the founder and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Zeev HaTorah, formerly a rebbi at Yeshivas Shor Yoshuv, points out a “remarkable thing,”³⁵⁵. The name Balak, he explains, symbolizes Torah and Tefillah. The first letter of the Torah is *beis*, and the last is *lamed*. The letter *kuf* is a hint to the one hundred brachos that one is required to say every day³⁵⁶, which corresponds to Tefillah. Also, the letters of the name Balak can be rearranged to spell *b'kol* with the voice. “These allusions convey to us the message”, that the Noam

³⁴⁸ Bamidbar 22:2

³⁴⁹ Shefa Chaim, Vol. 18, Balak, Ra'ava D'raivin/Shalosh Seudos, 5734/1974

³⁵⁰ Rashi on Bamidbar, 22:2, וירא בלק... את כל אשר עשה ישראל לאמרי

³⁵¹ Rashi on Bamidbar, 21:23, ולא נתן סיחן וגו'

³⁵² Quoted by Rabbi Elimelech Biderman: Torah Wellsprings, 5776, Balak

³⁵³ Noam Elimelech, Bamidbar, Balak

³⁵⁴ Talmud Bavli, Moed Katan, 16b

³⁵⁵ Rav Brazil, 5776, Balak, Balak and the Torah-Tefillah Solution

³⁵⁶ Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 6:7

Elimelech, the Trisker Maggid, and other Chassidic masters taught, “that Balak was afraid of our incredible weapon of the mouth which could easily defeat his great trained warriors,”³⁵⁷.

Explains Rabbi Shmuel Brazil, the statement of Rashi and of the Chassidic masters is one and the same. Balak was afraid of the military victories of the Jewish people, because he saw that despite their lack of experience in war, they were able to defeat Sichon and Og. He knew that the Jewish people had G-d on their side. Therefore, he thought, if he could “get to them first”, and curse them, with the help of Bilam, before the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel, then they would not complete their mission of serving Hashem, sanctifying and elevating the mundane³⁵⁸.

³⁵⁷ Rav Brazil, 5776, Balak, Balak and the Torah-Tefillah Solution

³⁵⁸ Nesivos Shalom al HaTorah, Bamidbar, Balak, ואגרשנו מן הארץ

Pinchas: Personal Prayer- Praying for Action

"וַיִּדְבֹר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: פִּינָחָס בֶּן־אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־אַהֲרֹן הִכֹּהן הַשִּׁיב אֶת־חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקָנָאוֹ אֶת־קִנְאָתִי בְּתוֹכָם וְלֹא־כִלִּיתִי אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאָתִי:"

HaShem spoke to Moshe, saying, : “Pinchas, son of Elazar son of Aharon the priest, has turned back My wrath from Bnei Yisrael by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out Bnei Yisrael people in My passion.”³⁵⁹

Parshas Balak ends with the women of Moav enticing the young Jewish men to sin. This quickly led to *avodah zarah*, to idol worship, as many Jewish men served the idol of Baal Peor. Because, as our sages teach us, it is only through a degradation of *kedushah*, that our *emunah*, our belief can be challenged³⁶⁰. A plague broke out. Twenty four thousand Jews died. Zimri, one of the heads of the tribe of Shimon, had relations with a Midianite princess, making a public spectacle of the act. Pinchas took action. He killed both Zimri and Kuzbi, the Midianite princess.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught quite bluntly: “If not for Pinchas, the Jewish people would, G-d forbid, have been liable to destruction. But because Pinchas went out and was zealous for the zealotry of Hashem, he silenced the judgement from off of Israel,”³⁶¹. The Kli Yakar writes that the act of Pinchas was that of total self-sacrifice, he risked his life for the honour of Hashem³⁶².

An act for the sake of Heaven alone, Pinchas’s act was remarkable. But, the Tiferes Shlomo, Rabbi Shlomo Chanoch Rabinowitz, the Rebbe of Radomsk asks an interesting question. “Didn’t Aharon HaKohen do the same at Korach’s rebellion when he terminated the plague of death? Didn’t Moshe Rabbeinu also accomplish the same at the *Cheit Ha’Eigel*? Yet, we do not find a pasuk saying that his act of righteousness is a merit from generation to generation, [that saved the nation] forever.”³⁶³. The Tiferes Shlomo answers that the way that Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon HaKohen stopped the

³⁵⁹ Bamidbar 25:10-11

³⁶⁰ Nesivos Shalom al HaTorah, Bamidbar, Balak, חטא ישראל בשטים

³⁶¹ Sichos HaRan, 96

³⁶² Kli Yakar on Bamidbar, 25:11, בקנאו את קנאתי בתוכם

³⁶³ Tiferes Shlomo al HaTorah, Bamidbar, Pinchas

death of the people was by doing a physical act. Aharon took the burning Ketores³⁶⁴, and Moshe ground the Golden Calf and sprinkled it on the water³⁶⁵. What Pinchas did was a novelty. He davened³⁶⁶. He said to himself: “What will be in the future generations when there will no longer be a Beis Hamikdash, Korbanos, Ketores, a Kohen Gadol, etc. to atone for them? How and with what will they survive the calamity that befalls them?” So he brought out the solution of *tefillah* which does not need any of the above.

What in the world is the Tiferes Shlomo saying? Besides doing the physical act, Moshe and Aharon certainly davened to Hashem. More than that, there is a glaring issue! Pinchas did not “just daven”, he also acted. He took a spear and killed Zimri and Kuzbi. The Baal Shem Tov HaKadosh taught³⁶⁷, and Rebbe Nachman of Breslov emphasized³⁶⁸ the need for turning the Torah we learn into a *tefillah*, a prayer, a vehicle of connecting to Hashem. But it is not just in our Torah learning. Our sages teach, there is nothing devoid of Hashem³⁶⁹. The pasuk in Mishlei³⁷⁰ implores us to “know” Hashem in everything that we do. The Baal Shem Tov explains that the word “דעהו”, that we commonly translate as “know”, is really from the *lashon*, the language of “חיבור”, connection. Teaches the *heilige* Baal Shem Tov, we have to connect to Hashem in everything that we do, even the seemingly mundane physicality in our lives³⁷¹. As we learn from a story in the Talmud³⁷², our *tefillah* must be “based on what’s going on in the world and based on what’s going on in our lives,”³⁷³. The Talmud teaches us that for Pinchas, it was not simply an ordinary *tefillah*, it was a serious internal struggle. At the end, he executed judgement and intervened³⁷⁴.

We can now understand, the novelty of Pinchas was not simply the fact that he *davened*. It wasn’t even how he *davened* per se. It was what was in his *davening*. Pinchas did not simply pray for salvation from above, pleading with Hashem to end the

³⁶⁴ Bamidbar 17:11

³⁶⁵ Shemos 32:20

³⁶⁶ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Brachos, 6b; Talmud Bavli, Maseches Brachos, 26b; Torah Temimah al

Tehillim, 106:30, ועמד פינחס ויפלל

³⁶⁷ Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, Noach 19:1

³⁶⁸ Likutei Moharan, Part II, Torah 25

³⁶⁹ Gevuros Hashem 25:4; Tanya, Part One, Sefer shel Beinonim, chapter 21; Be'er Mayim Chaim, Shemos, 13:18; Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bamidbar, 15:21

³⁷⁰ Mishlei 3:6

³⁷¹ Kesser Shem Tov, Vol. 2, 16

³⁷² Talmud Bavli, Maseches Shabbos, 10a

³⁷³ Tefillah Thoughts- Rabbi Menachem Penner, Inyanei d'Yoma: Tefillah during the COVID-19 crisis,

Praying differently at a time of crisis

³⁷⁴ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Sanhedrin, 44a

mageifah, the plague. Instead, he spoke to Hashem, in his own words. He worked through his issues by speaking with G-d. Pinchas did not beg Hashem to miraculously end the plague, rather he asked Hashem to show him the correct course of action.

Parshas Pinchas is read either right before, or on the first Shabbos of the “Three Weeks:”, the time period in Judaism known as *Bein HaMeitzarim*, when we actively mourn the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash. This understanding we came to, based on the Tiferes Shlomo and various other sources, is crucial to understanding this time period. We can spend three weeks lamenting the destruction of the Temple, praying for it to be rebuilt, or we can spend three weeks in pain over the fact that the Beis HaMikdash still has not been rebuilt by pleading with Hashem to show us the way, to allow us to actualize our potential, by yearning that it be rebuilt because of you.

Matos: Clarity- Seeing Hashem in the “Bad”

"וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־רָאשֵׁי הַמִּטּוֹת לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר זֶה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה"

Moshe spoke to the heads of Bnei Yisrael tribes, saying: “This is what Hashem has commanded.”³⁷⁵

Rabbi Tzaddok HaKohen of Lublin points out³⁷⁶, based on Rashi³⁷⁷, that Moshe spoke to the tribal heads of the Children of Israel, saying, “זה הדבר”, “this is the word” that G-d has commanded. All other prophets prophesied with “כה”, “thus” says Hashem. This is also brought down by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, in his magnum opus, Likutei Moharan, explained even further. Explains Rebbe Nachman: “Moshe achieved even more than they did in that he prophesied with “זה הדבר” For “כה” is like a dirty, foggy lens, whereas “זה הדבר” is compared to a clear and pristine lens,”³⁷⁸.

The Rebbe of Chemelnik, Rabbi Eliezer Lipa of Chmielnik, the son of the Noam Elimelech, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, taught that מטות is from the word מטה, low. Explains the Rebbe of Chemelnik, “this pasuk is referring to when one is feeling low, his *mazal* is failing, and everything is going against his will. At these times one must remember “זה הדבר אשר צוה ה’”, Hashem planned this, and therefore it is certainly for the best. “When one realizes this, I guarantee that things will become better for him,” the Rebbe of Chemelnik said,”³⁷⁹.

At first glance, these two *vorts* on the pasuk are completely separate. Yet, they tell us a deep truth. Of all the distinctions between Moshe Rabbeinu and the rest of the *nevi'im*, this clarity does not seem to fall into any of them³⁸⁰. Rather, it is an overarching concept. The greatness of Moshe, the difference between him and any other prophet, is that he was able to see his prophecy clearly, with the colloquial “20/20 vision”. This teaches us a valuable lesson. The *gadlus* of a person is their ability to see Hashem clearly in every situation.

³⁷⁵ Bamidbar 30:2

³⁷⁶ Pri Haaretz, Matos-Maasei, 10

³⁷⁷ Rashi on Bamidbar, 30:2, זה הדבר

³⁷⁸ Likutei Moharan, Vol. 1, Torah 5:2

³⁷⁹ Torah Wellsprings, 5776, Matos-Maasei

³⁸⁰ Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, 7:6

Now, we can also understand why Parshas Maasei comes directly after Matos. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook writes that “the Jewish nature is such that merely meeting with pain doesn't cause a spiritual distancing from the foundation of *emunah*. Even at the time when the entire world is confused, and it is impossible to stand on the foundation of life that is found within the holiness of *emunah* without pain and suffering, behold, *Klal Yisrael* are forever ready for this. For even though it may pain us (*Meitzar li*), we know that our Beloved it to us as well (*Dodi li*),”³⁸¹. Once we gain a little bit of knowledge and an appreciation of the need to see G-d in every aspect of our life, then, we can relate to and accept the divinely ordained journeys that we were sent on, even with all their difficulty, with love.

³⁸¹ Shemoneh Kevatzim 7:139

Maasei: Everywhere You Go, Hashem is With You

"אֵלֶּה מִסְעֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָצְאוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְצִבְאוֹתָם בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן:"

“These were the journeys of Bnei Yisrael who started out from the land of Egypt, troop by troop, in the charge of Moshe and Aharon.”³⁸²

Parashas Maasei begins with this verse, and a list of the forty-two encampments of the Jewish nation in their forty years of wandering in the desert. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilkov, a grandson of Baal Shem Tov, in his sefer, the Degel Machane Ephraim, brings down that the Baal Shem Tov HaKadosh taught that every Jew, in his lifetime, will have these forty-two journeys³⁸³. These travels don't necessarily mean moving from one place to the other or from one country to the next. In its simplest term, it means that everyone experiences forty-two different situations in his lifetime³⁸⁴.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov boldly brings down a reason for the Jewish people's wandering through the desert, based on the Kabbalistic sefer Asarah Ma'amarot. The Jewish people wandered the desert “because they sinned with “אלה”, by saying ““this is” your G-d, Israel”³⁸⁵. Explains Rebbe Nachman, the Jewish people had turned Hashem into a “guy in the sky” that would reward or punish them based on their behaviour. They lost all feeling, all connection for Hashem.

Parshas Maasei, usually read with the *sedra* of Matos, always fall during Bein HaMeitzarim, the three weeks of mourning and yearning for the Beis HaMikdash. Chazal tell us that the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed because of *sinas chinam*, baseless hatred³⁸⁶. Rabbi Itamar Schwartz, the author of “Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh” and the “Da Es.../Getting to Know...” series teaches us how destructive *sinas chinam* is. Explains Rav Schwartz: “When we build a structure, a brick is placed on top of another. Hashem created many details in Creation; we are all like many bricks that need to get added together, and form the complete structure of Creation. All details in Creation are many

³⁸² Bamidbar 33:1

³⁸³ Degel Machane Ephraim, Bamidbar, Maasei; This is also brought down in Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah,

Maasei, 1

³⁸⁴ Torah Wellsprings, 5776, Matos-Maasei

³⁸⁵ Shemos 32:4

³⁸⁶ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Yoma, 9b

parts of one whole which will ultimately have to come together,”³⁸⁷. As the Maharal taught: “When you love Hashem, it is impossible to not love his creations, and if you hate His creations, it is impossible to love Hashem, the G-d that created them,”³⁸⁸.

The common denominator between the lesson of Rebbe Nachman and the explanation of Rabbi Itamar Schwartz is simply the relationship. As Jews, we have to recognize that we have a pure and holy soul³⁸⁹, that our relationship with G-d does not change, even through sin³⁹⁰. The Zohar HaKadosh writes: “קוב”ה אורייתא וישראל כולו חד”, “HaKadosh Baruch Hu, the Torah, and the Jewish people are entirely one,”³⁹¹. This is explained at length by the great Chassidic masters. The previous Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, in his sefer, the Nesivos Shalom, gives one such explanation³⁹². Just as Hashem is infinite and above any understanding, so too it is impossible to comprehend the infinite Torah. So too, the Jewish people are beyond understanding. As Reb Baruch of Mezibuz, the nephew of the Baal Shem Tov, taught: “It is impossible to explain to a Jew what it means to be a Jew, because the root of a Jew is a portion of G-d that is embedded within him.”

The forty-two encampments of the Jewish people in the desert, the forty-two journeys of our lifetime, are written in the Torah and read publicly during a time of sadness and destruction to remind us that no matter what situation we find ourselves in, Hashem is there with us, supporting and sustaining us³⁹³.

³⁸⁷ Unity Talks: Stopping Sinas Chinam & Developing Ahavas Yisrael, pg. 112

³⁸⁸ Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Ahavas Reiah, Chap. 1

³⁸⁹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Brachos, 60b; Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Tefillah and Birkas Kohanim 7:3; Sefer

Kuzari 1:121; Siddur, Shacharit, Preparatory Prayers, Elokai Neshama

³⁹⁰ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Kiddushin 36a

³⁹¹ Zohar HaKadosh, Part III, 96b

³⁹² Nesivos Shalom al HaTorah, Bamidbar, Maasei, Inyan Mem-Beis Hamasa’os

³⁹³ Ramban al HaTorah, Bamidmar, Maasei, 33:1; Likutei Moharan, Torah 56, Os 3

Devarim: Mussar for our Generation

"אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה אל-כל ישראל בעבר הירדן במדבר בערבה מול סוף בין-פארן
ובין-תפל ולבן וְחִצְרֹת וְדִי-זָהָב:"

These are the words that Moshe addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan. Through the wilderness, in the Aravah near Suf, between Paran and Tofel, Lavan, Chazerot, and Di-zahav.³⁹⁴

Former British Chief Rabbi and renowned theologian Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote: “Devarim is the book of the covenant, the centre-point of Jewish theology, and the project it defines is unique,”³⁹⁵. Sefer Devarim, which is the retelling of *Yetziyas Mitzrayim* and the journey through the desert, also serves us a rebuke to the Jewish people of that generation and every generation after. Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, the illustrious Mashgiach of the Mir Yeshiva, quoted the Alter of Kelm, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv Broida, who said that Sefer Devarim is the Mussar of all Mussar³⁹⁶. Sefer Devarim, the many-part lecture given by Moshe Rabbeinu to the Jewish people is practical advice for how to grow as people, to become more moral and spiritual individuals. There is much argument among both medieval Jewish commentators and modern Bible critics to the divine nature of the *Mishneh Torah*, literally the second-telling of the Torah³⁹⁷. Yet, one thing is for certain; it is a strong and unchanging part of our *mesorah*, our tradition.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, once said that all the *hakdamos*, the introductions, to the various *sefarim* that are available in today’s wondrous age are simply null and void. As he explained, there is no book that is only for one type of person. We have to look at every text and say, “this speaks only about me, and was written only for me, and only obligates me.” While this certainly fits with the statement of our sages that a person has to say that “the world was created for me”³⁹⁸, this statement from Rabbi Steinsaltz is even deeper. Rabbi Steinsaltz was teaching a fundamental lesson that was relayed in previous generations by the teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov³⁹⁹ that the words of a tzaddik contain within them what is needed for the entire Jewish people and everything they need, for each person hears something

³⁹⁴ Devarim 1:1

³⁹⁵ Covenant and Conversation, 5777, Devarim

³⁹⁶ Daas Torah, Devarim, Vol. 2, Introduction

³⁹⁷ For an in-depth analysis see Daf Parashat Hashavua Parashat Devarim, The Uniqueness of Deuteronomy

written by Rabbi Yaakov Charlap

³⁹⁸ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Sanhedrin, 37a

³⁹⁹ Sichos HaRan 290

different and receives the message they need to receive. One who believes in authentic, Torah-true Judaism must believe that Sefer Devarim is as much a part of the *Toras Chaim*, the living, eternal Torah, and applies as much today, to each and everyone of us, as it did for the generation that heard it before entering the Land of Israel.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, in his famed commentary, HaKesav v'HaKabbalah points out that the pasuk mentions the fact that Moshe gave over this portion of Torah specifically *bamidbar*, in the desert. This seems quite odd. Why does it matter where exactly Moshe spoke to the Jewish people? What is so special about the desert? As discussed previously⁴⁰⁰, the lesson of the Jewish people's journey through the desert is proof of our unconditional relationship with Hashem. It is hinted at by HaKesav v'HaKabbalah that despite Moshe's rebuke to the nation, he did so in a way that showed G-d's never-ending relationship with the Jewish people.

This lesson alone is the essence of Moshe's recap and rebuke. Moshe's argument is simple: G-d wants a relationship with you. He always wants that relationship with you. Despite the numerous sins that we did, he still protected us and brought us to the banks of the Jordan River. Now, as we prepare to go into the Land of Israel, he wants us to truly believe in Him. Not simply as the Creator of the world, nor as the supervisor and enabler of our lives, but as the G-d of Israel, as our personal G-d.

⁴⁰⁰ See Bamidbar: Ultimately a Love Story; Maasei: Everywhere You Go, Hashem is With You

Va'eschanan: The Power and Purpose of Prayer

"וַאֲתַחֲנֶן אֶל־יְהוָה בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר:"

I pleaded with HaShem at that time, saying...⁴⁰¹

Rashi teaches us that the *lashon* of “חִינוּן”, pleading, the *shoresh* or root word of *Va'eschanan*, denotes that Moshe was asking for a *matnas chinam*, a free gift⁴⁰². The Chassidic masters emphasized this message⁴⁰³. The Maharal, in his commentary on the Torah explains this teaching⁴⁰⁴. True tzaddikim never rely on their merits. Moshe Rabbeinu was not asking Hashem based on the *zechusim* that he amassed. Instead, he was simply pleading with Hashem for a “free gift”, that he be granted permission to enter into Eretz Yisrael. The Gemara explains, only after his praise did Moshe make his personal request⁴⁰⁵. Moshe did not extol his own virtues. Instead, he praised Hashem for allowing him to see the greatness of G-d firsthand. He was the “most humble of all men”⁴⁰⁶, he saw himself as a *pashut yid*, a simple Jew.

This is a lesson that we must internalize. Moshe Rabbeinu, “the father of all prophets”⁴⁰⁷ realized that G-d owes us nothing. Hashem is not an ATM machine. Prayer is not a business deal, rather it is the “service of the heart”⁴⁰⁸. As the Maharal explains, the essence of *tefillah* is connecting to Hashem, strengthening our relationship with Him⁴⁰⁹. Prayer is not about asking for “stuff” from G-d, nor is it about receiving what we want in life. At its core, *tefillah* is simply about acknowledging that Hashem controls our ability for health, wealth, honour, and so on⁴¹⁰.

The Kotzker, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk famously taught: “Where is G-d? Hashem is only where you let Him in.” Our relationship with our Creator is reciprocal.

⁴⁰¹ Devarim 3:23

⁴⁰² Rashi on Devarim, 3:23

⁴⁰³ Pri Haaretz, Devarim, Va'eschanan, 2; Likutei Moharan, Part II 78:6; Tiferes Shlomo, Va'eschanan, 1

⁴⁰⁴ Gur Aryeh, Devarim, Va'eschanan, חנוּן מִתְנַת חֵן, אין מבקשים אלא מתנת חנם

⁴⁰⁵ Talmud Bavli, Masseches Brachos, 32a

⁴⁰⁶ Bamidbar 12:3

⁴⁰⁷ Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith, Principle Seven

⁴⁰⁸ Talmud Bavli, Masseches Ta'anis, 2a

⁴⁰⁹ Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Ha'Avodah, Chapter 3

⁴¹⁰ Iyunei Tefillah, Rabbi Prof. Avraham Weinroth, pg. 169

He desires the relationship, yearning for us to reach out to Him. The extent we bring Him into our life determines the quality of our relationship. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, in his commentary on the siddur, explains that our *neshamah* is constantly *davening* to Hashem and that the act of *tefillah* is simply for us to come into contact with the part of us that is constantly speaking to G-d⁴¹¹.

Prayer, regardless of the results that we can see, teaches us to lift up our eyes, to see the world and who created it⁴¹². It allows us to pause for a second. To stop and think. To take our noses out of a *sefarim*, to remove our eyes from our phones, to get rid of our spreadsheets for just one second. *Tefillah* teaches us to look up for a moment. To look up and see who created us! To see that there is a G-d in the world. To recall that HaKadosh Baruch Hu created the world. To realize that He controls every aspect of existence, from the beginning of time until now. Of course, Moshe Rabbeinu understood this. It's about time that we do too.

⁴¹¹ Olat Reiyah, Inyanei Tefillah, The Constant Prayer of the Soul

⁴¹² Isaiah 40:26

Eikev: Believing in Ourselves and in Judaism

"וְהָיָה עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמָעוּן אֶת הַמְּשָׁפְטִים הָאֵלֶּה וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וּשְׁמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ לְךָ
אֶת־הַבְּרִית וְאֶת־הַחֹסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתֶּיךָ:"

And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, HaShem your G-d will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers.⁴¹³

The *pshat*, the simple meaning of this verse, is that if we, the Jewish people, follow the rules of the Torah, then Hashem will keep to the covenant that he promised to our forefathers. Yet, the *Talmidei HaBaal Shem*, in a way only they can, find the deeper meaning within this important pasuk.

Rabbi Yehoshua of Ostrova, the father-in-law of the first Biala Rebbe, in his sefer the Toldos Adam explains this pasuk in an incredible way. Says the Toldos Adam⁴¹⁴: “וְהָיָה” is a *lashon* of *simchah*, happiness⁴¹⁵. “עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמָעוּן” refers to *ikvisa d’meshichah*, the footsteps (or heels) of Mashiach⁴¹⁶. “אֶת הַמְּשָׁפְטִים הָאֵלֶּה”, this is what our sages explain, that there will be divine judgement in the world. “וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם”, that you should bind yourself to the *tzaddikim*, the righteous of the generation, for their prayers and good deeds will protect you from the divine judgement, the “birthpangs of Mashiach”. Rabbi Yehoshua of Ostrova then adds that doctors know that there will be labour pains, yet they do everything in their power to ease those pains. So too, the righteous, though they know that bad things happen to good people, that there is terrible pain and suffering in the world, through their belief and sustained relationship with G-d, they try to do everything in their power to ease that pain.

Rabbi Itamar Schwartz, the *mechaber*, the author, of the nine volume series of sefarim known as Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh, explains that the spiritual reality of the virus that changed the world is rooted in the word “*kor*”, cold. That is, with the advent of

⁴¹³ Devarim 7:12

⁴¹⁴ Toldos Adam, Devarim, Eikev (Brought down in Otzar Pninei Gaonei HaDoros v’HaChassidus, 5780, Devarim, Parshas Eikev)

⁴¹⁵ Malbim on Bereishis, 18:15; Alshich al HaTorah, Shemos, 4:14; Or HaChaim on Bereishis, 27:40;

Or HaChaim on Devarim, 11:13; Or HaChaim on Devarim, 26:1; et al.

⁴¹⁶ Hinted to in Likutei Moharan, Part I, Torah 22, Os 15

smartphones and other challenges of society today, we are suffering from a lack of warmth, fire, and passion in all our relationships- with ourselves, our fellow men, and with Hashem.

As mentioned by the Toldos Adam, our sages call the time-period preceding *yemos ha'Mashiach*, *Ikvesah d'Meshicha*, the foothills of Mashiach. Rabbi Moshe Twersky, an incredible *talmid chacham* and *maggid shiur* who was killed *al Kiddush Hashem* in the 2014 Synagogue massacre in the Har Nof neighbourhood of Jerusalem taught in the name of our sages that “the heel of the foot has very little sensation relative to the rest of the body. The implication, then, of the term *Ikvesah d'Meshicha*, is that the people living in this time-period suffer with an acute lack of ability to feel,”⁴¹⁷. Rabbi Moshe Weinberger cries out with this message. In fact, he has dedicated his entire life to bring back a fiery, passionate *yiddishkeit*. Rav Weinberger once said: “Jews- healthy, learned, and sincere Jews- are aching for meaning and inspiration. They are not, G-d forbid, rejecting traditional Torah learning and *halacha*, nor do they seek to stir some revolution against the old guard. They are simply searching for the soul and light that they are missing.” This has been echoed by other great Torah leaders of our generation, such as Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Aish HaTorah and Rosh Kollel of the Jerusalem Kollel. Rav Berkowitz related: “Without question, the greatest challenge facing Jewry today is the lack of an emotional connection with the *Borei Olam*... We must bring back the *neshamah* back to *yiddishkeit*. Every *yid* has to know that Hashem loves him. Every *yid* has to feel close to Him. Every *yid* must learn to speak to Him.”

The Toldos Adam, and many of the *tzaddikim* taught that one of the ways to be protected from the destruction that comes before the rebirth and redemption is to connect ourselves to the righteous people of our generation. I would like to suggest that we go one step further. We must become *tzaddikim* ourselves! We must see ourselves as the righteous people that are holding up our generation. Despite the *yeridas hadoros*, the lessening of generations, as we get farther from the giving of the Torah, we must acknowledge that we are an incredible generation. We must recognize that we have the potential to be as righteous as Moshe Rabbeinu ⁴¹⁸.

It's about time we wake up and see the beauty in ourselves, in the world around us, in the Torah, and in the Jewish people. This pasuk teaches us that if we follow the rules of the Torah, G-d will keep to the covenant that he promised to our forefathers!

⁴¹⁷ Vayigdal Moshe, Devarim, Eikev

⁴¹⁸ See Yisro: Fulfilling our Potential

Anyone who is tapped into the inner essence of Jewish life and practice today will tell you: Hashem is ready to bring Mashiach, we just have to want it enough.

Re'eh: The Power to Choose

"רֵאֵה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה:"

See, this day I set before you blessing and curse.⁴¹⁹

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, in his sefer the Mei HaShiloach offers an insight into this pasuk. It is human nature to scream and cry out to G-d in moments of suffering, but when all is good many do not turn to Hashem to thank Him. They believe that their own determination and hardwork is the only factor. Thus, explains the Izhbitzer, the Torah teaches us that “every detail in our lives is a gift from Hashem,”⁴²⁰.

The Chasam Sofer, in his commentary on the Torah⁴²¹, points out that the verse begins in the singular “רֵאֵה”, but quickly transitions into plural with the word “לְפָנֶיכֶם”. After acknowledging that many have given interpretations for the odd grammar in the pasuk, the Chasam Sofer shares a fascinating idea. Chazal teach us that “a person should always consider himself to be half wicked and half righteous. If he did one mitzvah, praiseworthy is he, for he tipped himself toward the side of righteousness. If he sinned, woe is to him, for he tipped himself toward the side of guilt,”⁴²². Our sages teach us that we are constantly on the line! One action can tip the scale for good or evil. The Chasam Sofer adds, based on the strange grammar of this pasuk, that in every action, a person should see himself as if every event in the world depends on them. While we might think that our actions are negligible, inconsequential, insignificant and immeasurable, they have monumental consequences. Says the Chasam Sofer, the interesting language of the verse teaches us that the fate of the many depends on the individual.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, points out that the words “רֵאֵה אֲנִי” can be read as meaning “look at me”. It was as if Moshe Rabbeinu was saying, “Take a good look at me! Everything that I have accomplished, you are able to accomplish for yourselves!”⁴²³. Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar explains that this pasuk is teaching us an invaluable lesson. We cannot look at the “under-achievers”, those that

⁴¹⁹ Devarim 11:26

⁴²⁰ A line from a popular song, Krach Fun De Pickle, Rabbi Yosef (Joey) Newcomb

⁴²¹ Chasam Sofer al HaTorah, Devarim, Re'eh, 43, רֵאֵה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה

⁴²² Midrash Rabbah, Koheles, 10:1; Bartenura on Mishnah, Kiddushin 1:10; Rabbeinu Yonah on Pirkei Avos, 2:13; Rosh on Rosh Hashanah, 1:5; Binyan Yehoshua on Avos D'Rebbe Nasan 31:2; et al.

⁴²³ See Yisro: Fulfilling our Potential

are not on our level, in order to pat ourselves on the back. Instead, we must train ourselves to see those who have achieved more than us, to use these great people as motivation, to set our spiritual sights ever higher⁴²⁴.

The Ramban explains that this pasuk is the Torah source for free will⁴²⁵. To sum up the Jewish view on *bechirah chofshis*, free will, seems impossible. Yet, this is precisely what Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz did⁴²⁶! In short, free will exists only in the arena of morality. Thus, Judaism believes that what you do in the trials and tribulations of everyday life is essentially who you are. That being said, there is so much in life that a person simply cannot control. Your health, wealth and many other areas of life have large components that cannot be controlled no matter how hard you try. As the Mei HaShiloach taught, as believing Jews, we must have faith that everything, both good and bad, is from Hashem. As the Chasam Sofer added, we must see the entire world as resting on our actions. As the Or HaChaim pointed out, we must strive for greatness! This pasuk, and our sages explanations provide us with a profound understanding. If you see your decisions and actions as the passive results of your background and your nature, your circumstances beyond your control, you have not begun to live. It is when you recognize that you have free will, that you have the ability to choose between the good and evil that is before you, to ultimately choose who you are and how you live, that is what it means to be a Jew. That is what it means to be alive!

⁴²⁴ Or HaChaim on Devarim, 11:26

⁴²⁵ Ramban on Devarim, 11:29

⁴²⁶ The Thinking Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life, Chapter 1

Shoftim: Holding Ourselves Accountable

"שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתֶּן-לָךְ בְּכָל-שְׁעָרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ לְשִׁבְטֶיךָ וּשְׁפֹטוּ אֶת-הָעָם
מִשְׁפָּט-צֶדֶק:"

You shall appoint judges and officials for your tribes, in all the settlements that HaShem your G-d is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice.⁴²⁷

Rashi⁴²⁸ explains that “שופטים” are the judges who pronounce sentence, and “שוטרים” are those who chastise the people at the judges’ order, beating the convict until he accepts the judge’s sentence. Rabbi Nassan Tzvi Finkel, the famed Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Mir, in a certain talk to the *talmidim* of the yeshiva⁴²⁹, explained an important concept in *avodas Hashem*. From the essence of the biblical commandment to appoint “שוטרים” that would enforce judgement, we can ask a fundamental question. Certainly at the time of the giving of the Torah and the following few generations everyone knew that they must follow Torah and that the rulings of judges were binding. In that case, what was the purpose of the “שוטרים”? The answer is that without those “שוטרים”, without people to enforce judgement, to hold us accountable, we cannot rely on ourselves! The nature of a person is to shirk responsibility, even in the small things that everyone recognizes and understands.

Rav Nassan Tzvi then added that in our generation we have merited great *dayanim* and *poskim* that clarify and apply the laws, however there are no “שוטרים” that compel us to follow those laws. If human nature is such that we cannot hold ourselves accountable, how is it possible to strengthen ourselves and to be saved from sin without “שוטרים”, people who will subjugate and force us to do the right thing? The answer the Rosh Yeshiva gives is “through learning *mussar*”, works of Jewish ethics and self-improvement. By learning about what we should be doing and the lofty levels that are within our reach, slowly, slowly, we become accountable to ourselves, which then becomes part of our nature.

Parshas Shoftim is always read in the month of Elul, the month preceding the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, the month where, the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch

⁴²⁷ Devarim 16:18

⁴²⁸ Rashi on Devarim, 16:18, שופטים ושטרים

⁴²⁹ Sichos Rabbi Nassan Tzvi, pg. 191

teaches us, that “the King is in the field”,⁴³⁰, reaching out to us, waiting for us to return to him. Rabbi Eliezer David Greenwald, in his sefer, Keren L’David⁴³¹, teaches that the need to appoint “שופטים ושוטרים... בכל-שעריך”, judges and officials in all of your settlements, hints to the month of Elul, which is the שער, the gateway, to the new year. Rabbi Greenwald also explains that this is why the pasuk uses the seemingly extra word “לך”, for you. In Elul, we cannot rely on others. We must learn *mussar*, do *teshuvah*, and work on ourselves, so that we can plead our case before G-d on *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgement, Rosh HaShanah.

⁴³⁰ Likutei Torah, Re’eh, 32b

⁴³¹ Keren L’David, Chidushei Aggadah v’Drushim l’Moadei Hashem, Elul, Os 7

Ki Seitzei: Striking First

"כִּי־תֵצֵא לַמִּלְחָמָה עַל־אֹיְבֶיךָ וַהֲתֵנּוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּיָדְךָ וְשִׁבִּיתָ שְׂבִיּוֹ:"

When you take the field against your enemies, and HaShem your G-d delivers them into your power and you take some of them captive...⁴³²

Someone complained to the Tiferes Shlomo, Rabbi Shlomo HaKohen Rabinowitz of Radomsk, that he has many ups and downs in his battle with the *yetzer hara*. The man told the Radomsker: "Just yesterday, I won the battle against the *yetzer hara*, but today, I failed again." The Tiferes Shlomo explained to him that fighting the *yetzer hara* is like going to war. In war, one doesn't win every battle. Sometimes the enemy wins. The main thing is to continue fighting, and even after a loss. The Rebbe told the man that, in fact, this is alluded in by the words of our pasuk, "כִּי־תֵצֵא לַמִּלְחָמָה", when you go out to war. Chazal explain that this pasuk alludes to the war against the evil inclination⁴³³. "The *yetzer hara* is our private, tailor-made enemy, fighting against us at every moment. It never sleeps. Even as we sleep, it is plotting ways to lure us to sin. The first step is to acknowledge this!⁴³⁴ Once we acknowledge that there is a war going on, when we fight that battle, we will win! The pasuk doesn't say "כִּי־תֵצֵא לַנְצָחוֹן", when you go out to win and conquer [the *yetzer hara*]. The Radomsker explains, the goal is simply to battle, and when you lose a fight, to try again. Ultimately, you will be victorious⁴³⁵.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, the Kotzker Rebbe notes that this pasuk teaches a preemptive approach⁴³⁶. Instead of passively sitting back and waiting for the enemy to attack, we proactively go out and confront the enemy. This is crucial when it comes to the battle against the evil inclination. We must be proactive rather than reactive! Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Ponevezh in Bnei Brak, once said: "Elul is a time when people can become close to Hashem, and they can rise in the spiritual ranks if they try to do so,"⁴³⁷. Jewish tradition teaches that the preparation for Rosh HaShanah is crucial. The Shelah HaKadosh, commenting on a pasuk⁴³⁸, explains that the word "אֲרִיָּה", lion, can be read as an acronym for Elul, Rosh HaShanah,

⁴³² Devarim 21:10

⁴³³ See Or HaChaim on Devarim, 21:10, כִּי תֵצֵא לַמִּלְחָמָה; Keser Shem Tov 2:4; Keser Shem Tov 1:102; Likutei Moharan, Torah 107, Os 1.

⁴³⁴ Chovos HaLevavos, Shaar Yichud Hamaaseh, Chapter 5

⁴³⁵ This story is brought down in Torah Wellsprings, 5776, Ki Seitzei

⁴³⁶ Brought down in YUTorah in Print, 5774, Ki Teitzei, Spiritual Warfare, Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

⁴³⁷ Darkei HaChizuk, 5777, Ki Seitzei

⁴³⁸ Amos 3:8

Yom Kippur, and Hoshanah Rabbah⁴³⁹. This hints to the fact that the entire month of Elul is on the level of three of the holiest and most important times on the Jewish calendar.

The Kozhnitzer Maggid, in Avodas Yisrael⁴⁴⁰, teaches that the *teshuvah* and reflection that we do in the month of Elul is the primary fight in the war against the *yetzer hara*. We cannot expect to come into court on Rosh HaShanah without preparing our case. Failure to prepare is simply preparing to fail! For the entire month of Elul, we work on building our defense. That way, when we are summoned into the courtroom on Rosh HaShanah, we will not be afraid, for we are assured that Hashem will judge us favourably⁴⁴¹.

⁴³⁹ Shenei Luchos HaBris, Torah Shebichsav, Shoftim, Torah Ohr, 5

⁴⁴⁰ AvodaS Yisrael, Sefer Devarim, Ki Teitzei, כי תצא למלחמה על אויבך

⁴⁴¹ Shenei Luchos HaBris, Aseres HaDibros, Rosh HaShanah, Torah Ohr

Ki Savo: Emunah Goes a Long Way

"וְהָיָה כִּי-תָבוֹא אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ נַחֲלָה וּיְרִשְׁתָּהּ וּשְׁבַתָּ בָּהּ:"

When you enter the land that HaShem your G-d is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it...⁴⁴²

Parshas Ki Savo begins with the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, first-fruits. This mitzvah can only be fulfilled in the Land of Israel, when the Temple is in existence⁴⁴³, and is unique due to the *bas kol*, the heavenly voice, that would call out: "Just as you have brought the first-fruits today, you will be privileged to do so next year, too!"⁴⁴⁴. To our great dismay, the Beis HaMikdash has not been rebuilt, and we are unable to fulfill the mitzvah of *bikkurim* and receive the great promise that comes with it. However, the Midrash⁴⁴⁵ teaches us that Moshe foresaw that the Temple was going to be destroyed and the first-fruits were not going to be able to be brought to Yerushalayim. Therefore, he enacted that the Jewish people pray three times every day, because prayer is more pleasing to Hashem than all other good deeds and *korbanos*⁴⁴⁶.

The Sefas Emes, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, teaches that *bikkurim* are a preparation for Rosh HaShanah⁴⁴⁷. This is because the foundation of the mitzvah of the first-fruits is thanking Hashem for the past. Only after we say: "כָּל דְּעֵיִד רַחֲמָנָא לְטָב עֵיִד" ⁴⁴⁸, when we truly understand that everything, both the good and seemingly bad, are true goodness emitting from the source of all goodness⁴⁴⁹, can we request from Hashem. With the *bikkurim*, just like *tefillah*⁴⁵⁰, we must praise Hashem before asking for our own needs.

The Rebbe Rashab, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber Schneerson of Lubavitch, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe points out that the beginning of the verse seems to imply that Hashem will give us the land (as a gift), yet the end of the pasuk seems to suggest that we will possess the land (as an inheritance)⁴⁵¹. Our sages teach us that through our

⁴⁴² Devarim 26:1

⁴⁴³ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 606

⁴⁴⁴ Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Savo 1; Rashi on Devarim, 26:16, ושמרת ועשית אותם

⁴⁴⁵ Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Savo, 1

⁴⁴⁶ This idea is also found in the Malbim on Mishlei, 15:8

⁴⁴⁷ Sefas Emes, Devarim, Ki Savo 7

⁴⁴⁸ Talmud Bavli, Masseches Brachos, 60b

⁴⁴⁹ Yeshayah 48:17; Derech Hashem, Chelek Aleph, B'Tachlis HaBri'ah; Likutei Tefillos, Prayer 65

⁴⁵⁰ Talmud Bavli, Masseches Brachos, 32a

⁴⁵¹ Sefer HaMa'amarim, 5666, Yom Tov shel Rosh Hashanah

avodah in this world, we allow the *shefa*, the divine flow, to trickle down to us⁴⁵². The Rebbe Rashab explains that this verse is teaching us that our actions continue and further the *ohr ein sof*, the infinite light of Hashem. That is why, the first Rebbe of Trisk, Rabbi Avraham Twersky, teaches that in our approach to Rosh HaShanah, we must remain in a state of joy, and not fall into sadness or depression⁴⁵³.

In the *teshuvah* process, it is easy to come to the belief that all that went wrong in our lives is all our fault. After all, the Gemara teaches us that “there is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity.”⁴⁵⁴. However, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches us that “Hashem’s way is to always focus on the good which people do. Although there is also some not good mixed in with it, He pays no attention to this,”⁴⁵⁵. Yes, it is important to focus on failures, where we went wrong and have room to improve. That being said, it is just as important to focus on finding our “נקודות טובות”, the good points within us⁴⁵⁶. When we recognize that there is a source to all, when we pray, when we give the *bikkurim*, we get out of the mindset of “כחי ועצמי עשה לי את-החיל הזה”, “my own power and the might of my own hand have won this for me.”⁴⁵⁷. As Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik Yehuda Yechiel Safran of Komarno teaches, this realization, the belief that Hashem controls everything and that all happens according to His will, will bring us to good *middos*⁴⁵⁸.

⁴⁵² Derech Hashem, Chelek Revi'i, Tefillah

⁴⁵³ Brought down in Otzar Pninei Gaonei HaDoros v'HaChassidus, 5779, Devarim, Parshas Ki Savo

⁴⁵⁴ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Shabbos, 55a

⁴⁵⁵ Likutei Moharan, Part II, Torah 17, Os 3

⁴⁵⁶ Likutei Moharan, Part I, Torah 282

⁴⁵⁷ Devarim 8:17

⁴⁵⁸ Nesiv Mitzvosecha, Nesiv Ha'Emunah, 1:4

Nitzavim: Standing Together in Judgement

"אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רָאשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבֻטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשִׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל:"

You stand this day, all of you, before HaShem your G-d, tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel.⁴⁵⁹

Parshas Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbos preceding Rosh HaShanah. Rabbi Avraham Weinberg of Slonim, in his sefer the Beis Avraham, taught that on the last Shabbos of the year, even on the last day of the year, a person can correct his or her entire year⁴⁶⁰. The Zohar teaches that every time the word “הַיּוֹם” is found, it hints to Rosh HaShanah, the Day of Judgement⁴⁶¹. Rabbi Yitzchak of Neshchiz, expounds on this further⁴⁶². He explains that this is why the Torah teaches that everyone should be before Hashem, including the leaders, elders, and officers. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, pointed out⁴⁶³ the statement of the Gemara that teaches us that *amidah*, standing, refers to prayer⁴⁶⁴. Before we pray each and every day⁴⁶⁵, and certainly before Rosh HaShanah, we must unite and accept upon ourselves the mitzvah of loving our fellow Jew.

The Chizkuni, on this pasuk, writes that this pasuk teaches us that regardless of our social standing, we are all equally standing before G-d⁴⁶⁶. This is essential to know before the Day of Judgement. Even though we may see ourselves as small and unimportant, in G-d’s eyes, we are held just as accountable as the leaders of our generation. Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Kluger, explains that this pasuk hints to the fact that each person is unique and has their own special ways of serving Hashem (within the framework of Torah Judaism)⁴⁶⁷. Rav Kluger also points out that the only way a Jew can stand before Hashem, is when he or she is united with all other Jews⁴⁶⁸. Our *tzaddikim*

⁴⁵⁹ Devarim 29:9

⁴⁶⁰ Brought down in Otzar Pninei Gaonei HaDoros v’HaChassidus, 5779, Devarim, Parshas Nitzavim

⁴⁶¹ Zohar HaKadosh, Part II, 32b

⁴⁶² Toldos Yitzchak, brought down in Otzar Pninei Gaonei HaDoros v’HaChassidus, 5779, Devarim, Parshas Nitzavim

⁴⁶³ Likutei Moharan, Torah 44, Os 5

⁴⁶⁴ Talmud Bavli, Masseches Brachos, 6b

⁴⁶⁵ Mishnas Chassidim, Tefillas Ha’Asiyah, Chapter 1, pg. 42; Siddur, Upon Arising, Upon Entering

Synagogue, based on the teachings of the Arizal

⁴⁶⁶ Chizkuni on Devarim, 29:9

⁴⁶⁷ Asicha B’Chukecha, Devarim, Ki Seitzei, pg. 287

⁴⁶⁸ *ibid.*

teach that the only way we can succeed in our judgement on Rosh HaShanah is to have complete unity amongst the Jewish people⁴⁶⁹.

“The *holy sefarim* tell us that the way to achieve *Ahavas Yisrael* is through being *dan l'kaf zechus* – judging others favorably,”⁴⁷⁰. Amongst many things, the *avodah* of Elul is learning to see past the flaws in ourselves and others, so that we can achieve total unity on *Yom HaDin*.

⁴⁶⁹ Oros HaMoadim, Vol. 1, pg. 225

⁴⁷⁰ Unity Talks: Stopping Sinas Chinam & Developing Ahavas Yisrael, pg. 37

Vayeilech: The Power of the Individual and the Importance of Feeling Hashem

"וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:"
Moshe went and spoke these things to all Israel.⁴⁷¹

The Ibn Ezra, in commentary on this pasuk, tells us where Moshe went. According to the Ibn Ezra, Moshe went to all twelve tribes, to inform them of his approaching passing and implore them to listen to and respect Yehoshua⁴⁷². This is also the opinion of the Chizkuni⁴⁷³. However, the Ramban gives a different explanation⁴⁷⁴. He explains that Moshe left the encampment of the Levi'im, where the assembly found in Parshas Nitzavim had taken place, and went to the encampment of the rest of the Jewish people, to show them respect and to take his final leave of them as on that very day he was to die on Har Nevo. A third explanation is offered by the Sforno, who teaches that Moshe was self-motivated and acted on his own initiative in giving this next talk to the Jewish people⁴⁷⁵.

Regardless of where Moshe went, what exactly is going on in this pasuk, the Malbim points out something crucial⁴⁷⁶. Says the Malbim, the going and the speaking was to the entire Jewish people! This is somewhat puzzling. After all, Moshe has been lecturing the entire nation throughout Sefer Devarim. When we contemplate for a moment, it is not so hard to understand. When he was in a weakened state, as death drew near, Moshe Rabbeinu, the greatest prophet of our people, arguably the greatest man that ever lived, went around to everyone else and began comforting them about his impending death.

We can say that Moshe was such a *tzaddik* and therefore was not afraid of his impending demise, yet we cannot ignore that he went to everyone else to console them. This level of greatness is surely one of the many reasons that we compare every *tzaddik* to Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe Rabbeinu recognized the importance of the individual. Had there been one Jew in a state of worry or anxiety, that would have been too much for

⁴⁷¹ Devarim 31:1

⁴⁷² Ibn Ezra on Devarim, 31:1, וילך

⁴⁷³ Chizkuni on Devarim, 31:1, וילך משה

⁴⁷⁴ Ramban on Devarim, 31:1, וילך משה

⁴⁷⁵ Sforno on Devarim, 31:1, וילך משה

⁴⁷⁶ Malbim on Devarim, 31:1, וילך משה וידבר את הדברים האלה

him to handle. He was carrying the weight of the nation on his shoulders. As the Torah teaches us, this burden affected him greatly⁴⁷⁷.

The Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, was known for saying: "I do not want followers who are righteous, rather I want followers who are too busy doing good that they won't have time to do bad." Throughout Sefer Devarim, it is clear that Moshe is not instructing the people to "be righteous", to create a religion of learned people devoid of connection to G-d. Rather Moshe teaches time and time again that the most important thing is *deveikus*, connection to Hashem⁴⁷⁸. He explains that this is only realized through loving G-d, fearing Him, and fulfilling His commands.

At the end of his lifetime, Moshe Rabbeinu was crying out to his generation what the *tzaddikim* and *mashpi'im* today are trying to relay. We need a Judaism that is experiential. We have to change our entire perspective from one of rules and restrictions, of a punitive and angry g-d, to one of *penimiyus*, inner depth. A person must feel Hashem with every fibre of their being. After all, Sefer Devarim teaches us that *yiddishkeit* is solely about connection. Connection to ourselves, connection to the Jewish people, connection to Eretz Yisrael, and connection to Hashem.

⁴⁷⁷ Bamidbar 11:11

⁴⁷⁸ Devarim 4:4; Devarim 10:20; Devarim 11:22; Devarim 13:5; Devarim 30:20

Ha'azinu: A Song to Heaven and Earth?

"הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶדְבָּרָה וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ אִמְרֵי-פִי:"

Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!⁴⁷⁹

Shiras Ha'azinu, the Song of Ha'azinu (32:1-43), opens with an invocation of the heavens and earth. Rashi, quoting a Midrash⁴⁸⁰, teaches that Moshe was essentially calling the heavens and earth as witnesses against the Jewish people, for they would endure forever⁴⁸¹. Rabbi Baruch Epstein, in his commentary, the Torah Temimah⁴⁸², points out that Moshe said "הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם... וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ" and Yeshayahu HaNavi cried out "שָׁמְעוּ שָׁמַיִם וְהָאֲזִינוּ אָרֶץ"⁴⁸³, because Moshe was closer to the heavens than he was to earth, and Yeshayah was closer to the Earth than he was to heaven. This is based on the understanding that the verb "הָאֲזִינוּ" implies listening closely, while the verb "שָׁמְעוּ" can mean both hearing something from afar, as well as listening closely.

In Jewish history, we have been blessed to have leaders that were on par with the spiritual qualities of the people they were instructing. Human beings are likened to the famous ladder of Yaakov Avinu, that is firmly placed in the ground, stretching all the way up to the heavens⁴⁸⁴. In the generation of those that entered into Eretz Yisrael, we were at the top, so close to *shleimus*, wholeness, complete perfection. However, by the time of Yeshayah's prophecies, at the time of the destruction of the second Beis HaMikdash, we had fallen so low. Yet, at both times, we had leaders that could speak to us, in that generation and for generations to come.

The word "הַשָּׁמַיִם" has the same *gematria*, numerical value, as the word *neshamah*, soul, the heavenly part of a person, while the Earth symbolizes the earthly body. When a person guards his soul in holiness and purity and does not damage it, his body is protected from all plagues and illness and he is healthy. The reverse is also true⁴⁸⁵. The Kozhnutzer Maggid, seems to hint at this concept, teaching that when a *tzaddik* wants to give *mussar* to others, oftentimes the "sinners" would not be open to hear his

⁴⁷⁹ Devarim 32:1

⁴⁸⁰ Sifrei, Devarim, 306:15

⁴⁸¹ Rashi on Devarim, 32:1

⁴⁸² Torah Temimah al HaTorah, Devarim, 32:1, 'והָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וגו'

⁴⁸³ Yeshayah 1:2

⁴⁸⁴ Bereishis 28:12

⁴⁸⁵ Based on Rabbi Menachem Azolai's weekly parsha sheet, Ohr Ha'Emunah, 5777, Ha'azinu

rebuke. Therefore, just as Moshe (and Yeshayah) did, they were speaking separately, first to the root soul of the people, the heavenly aspect, and then to their physical selves, the earthly aspect⁴⁸⁶.

These are just a few insights. Shiras Ha'azinu is cloaked in difficult, poetic language. However, the message is quite simple. It teaches that though Hashem threatens to hide Himself from us, it is not a punishment. Rather, it is a greater revelation of His glory and presence⁴⁸⁷.

⁴⁸⁶ Avodas Yisrael, Sefer Devarim, Ha'Azinu, 1;

For more on connecting to your root soul, check out the Four Elements Institute under the guide of Rabbi Itamar Schwartz

⁴⁸⁷ Likutei Moharan, Part I, Torah 56, Os 3

V'Zos HaBracha: The Power and Purpose of the Jewish People

"וְזֹאת הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַךְ מֹשֶׁה אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ:"

This is the blessing with which Moshe, the man of G-d, bade Bnei Yisrael farewell before he died.⁴⁸⁸

Rashi, quoting a Midrash⁴⁸⁹, emphasizes that this took place very shortly before Moshe's passing⁴⁹⁰. The Ibn Ezra conquers with Rashi, and also points out that this is very similar to Yaakov Avinu, who gave out blessings on his deathbed⁴⁹¹. The Ramban teaches us that the words "אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים" imply that Moshe's blessings were always fulfilled, because he was a man of G-d. And, as our sages teach, the prayers of the righteous are G-d's desire⁴⁹². Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, in his sefer, the Kedushas Levi⁴⁹³, explains that the word "זאת" refers to the primary component of something. When the Moshe begins his *bracha*, it returns us back to the occasion of the first plague upon the Egyptians, where the Torah uses the word "זאת", to bring home to Pharaoh the idea that the Jewish people are the principal reason that the universe exists as it does. It is safe to say that the Kedushas Levi is implying that Moshe was hinting at the fact that as he departs from this world, it is important for the Jewish people to know that they are unlike any other nation and that creation exists as it does solely for the Jewish people.

A major proponent of antisemitism is the concept of a "chosen people"⁴⁹⁴. We have to understand what this means, that it is not a conflict with the modern-day notion of equality. The Torah teaches us that every human being is created equal, "*btezlem elokim*"⁴⁹⁵, in the image of G-d. This leads to the question, how can one person or one nation be chosen? We have to ask ourselves: What is the purpose and point of chosenness? What is the purpose of Jewish identity? What is our purpose? What is our mission? After all, it would be so much easier just to be moral people and keep the Seven

⁴⁸⁸ Devarim 33:1

⁴⁸⁹ Sifrei, Devarim 342:7

⁴⁹⁰ Rashi on Devarim, 33:1, לפני מותו ... זאת הברכה

⁴⁹¹ Ibn Ezra on Devarim, 33:1, לפני מותו

⁴⁹² Ramban on Devarim, 33:1, אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים

⁴⁹³ Kedushas Levi, Shemos, Vaera, 18

⁴⁹⁴ Devarim 14:2

⁴⁹⁵ Bereishis 1:27

Noahide Laws. Why do we need the 613 biblical commandments? This was inadequately explained earlier in the book⁴⁹⁶. After all, the power of the Jewish people cannot be quantified⁴⁹⁷.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, in his monumental work, *Peninei Halacha*⁴⁹⁸, explains something that is made quite clear throughout Jewish thought. That is, by tapping into the sanctity of *Klal Yisrael*, an individual is able to do a full and complete *teshuvah*, to return to his essential self, to return to the person he desires to be, and ultimately to return to Hashem. At the end of his life, throughout Sefer Devarim, Moshe Rabbeinu cried out the message that we will always remain Jews, we cannot give up this responsibility of chosenness, the responsibility of continuing the mission of the Jewish people, of making the world a more moral and G-dly place. More than that, Moshe showed us that as long as the candle is still burning, there is still work to be done. Moshe Rabbeinu reminded us that if we believe we have the power to destroy, then surely we have the ability to repair such brokenness⁴⁹⁹.

⁴⁹⁶ See “Kedoshim: Different than all the Rest”

⁴⁹⁷ Mei HaShiloach, Volume I, Bamidbar, Bamidbar

⁴⁹⁸ Peninei halacha, Yamim Noraim, 6:5

⁴⁹⁹ Likutei Moharan, Part II, Torah 112