

PARSHA INSIGHTS

Nitzavim/Vayelech

ARISTOCRACY OF HOLINESS

“You are standing today, all of you, before the L-rd, your G-d; the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers – all people of Israel.” (13:17)

Rabbi Nota Schiller, Rosh Yeshiva of Ohr Somayach, once remarked, “Judaism is democracy of opportunity and an aristocracy of opinion.” Judaism is democratic, anyone can sit down and open up a *Gemara* and start to learn, but when it comes to decisions that affect the whole of the Jewish People, we listen only to the great Sages of every generations — the aristocracy of holiness.

But Judaism is a democracy on another level as well.

The halacha says that if someone orders a Jew: “Kill or be killed!” he must let himself be killed. The Talmud’s reasoning (Pesachim 25) is that who’s to say that your blood is redder than his? Maybe G-d thinks his life is more significant than yours. So you have no right to end his or her life.

Thus, even if someone came to the *Gadol HaDor*, the greatest Jew in his generation, whose righteousness and piety were beyond compare, and said “Kill this little Yidele!

Kill this insignificant soul!”, the *Gadol HaDor* would say, “Kill me! Maybe his life is dearer to G-d than mine.”

Moshe always would speak first to the princes and only afterwards to all the Jewish People (Rashi, beginning of Mattot). In our Parsha, however, he addresses the entire Jewish nation first, as it says above, “And Moshe called to all Yisrael and said to them...”

For this reason Moshe says, “You are standing today, all of you...” There is no distinction between you and “the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers” — you are “all men of Israel” and no one knows who is greater than whom — except G-d.

• Sources: Rabbi Moshe Alshich (1508–1593, Safed); Rabbi Simcha Bunim Bonhart of Peshis’ke/Przysucha, Poland (1765–1827)

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The Ohr Somayach Family wishes you and yours and all of Israel a year filled with happiness, health and peace.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Nitzavim

On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers all the people, young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women, in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations yet unborn. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship because, in spite of having witnessed the abominations of Egypt, there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality. Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel which will result from failure to heed G-d's *mitzvot*. Descendants of that generation and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all — the Jewish People have forsaken the One who protects them in favor of powerless idols. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. However assimilated they will have become among the nations, eventually G-d will bring them back to *Eretz Yisrael*. Moshe tells the people to remember that fulfilling the Torah is not an impossibility; rather it's within the grasp of every Jew. The *parsha* dramatically concludes with Moshe comparing the Jewish People's choice to follow the Torah to a choice between life and death. Moshe exhorts the people to choose life.

Vayelech

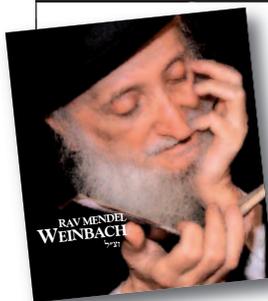
On the last day of his life, Moshe goes from tent to tent bidding farewell to his people, encouraging them to “keep the faith.” Moshe tells them that whether he is among them or not, G-d is with them. He summons Yehoshua, and, in front of all the people, exhorts him to be strong and courageous as leader of the Jewish People. Thus, he strengthens Yehoshua's status. Moshe teaches the mitzvah of *hakhel*: Every seven years on the first of the intermediate days of Succot, the entire nation, including small children, is to gather at the Temple to hear the king read from the Book of Devarim. The sections read deal with faithfulness to G-d, the covenant and reward and punishment. G-d tells Moshe that his end is near, and he should summon Yehoshua to stand with him in the *Mishkan*, where G-d will teach Yehoshua. G-d tells Moshe and Yehoshua that after entering the Land the people will be

unfaithful and worship other gods. G-d will then completely “hide His face”, so that it will seem that the Jewish People are at the mercy of fate, hunted by all. G-d instructs Moshe and Yehoshua to write down a song — *Ha'azinu* — which will serve as “witness” against the Jewish People when they sin. Moshe records the song in writing and teaches it to *Bnei Yisrael*. Moshe completes his transcription of the Torah and instructs the *levi'im* to place it to the side of the Holy Ark, so that no one will ever write a new Torah Scroll different from the original, for there will always be a reference copy.

Haazinu

Almost all of *Ha'azinu* is a song, written in the Torah in two parallel columns. Moshe summons the Heavens and the earth to stand as eternal witnesses to what will happen if the Jewish People sin and do not obey the Torah. He reminds the people to examine the history of the world and note how the Jewish People are rescued from obliteration in each generation — that G-d “pulls the strings” of world events so that *Bnei Yisrael* can fulfill their destiny as His messengers in the world. G-d's kindness is such that Israel should be eternally grateful, not just for sustaining them in the wilderness, but for bringing them to a land of amazing abundance and for defeating their enemies. But this physical bounty leads the people to become over-indulged. Physical pleasures corrupt the morals of the people. They worship empty idols and powerless gods and indulge in all kinds of depravity. G-d will then let nations with no moral worth subjugate Israel and scatter them across the world. However, their only purpose is as a rod to chastise the Jewish People. When these nations think that it is through their own power that they have dominated Israel, G-d will remind them that they are no more than a tool to do His will. The purpose of the Jewish People is fundamental — that man should know his Creator. Neither exile nor suffering can sever the bond between G-d and His people, and eventually in the final redemption this closeness will be restored. G-d will then turn His anger against the enemies of Israel, as though they were His own enemies, showing no mercy to the tormentors of His people. G-d then gives His last commandment to Moshe: That he should ascend Mount Nevo and be gathered there to his people.

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PARSHA Q&A ?

Nitzavim

1. Why did Moshe gather the Jewish People together on the day of his death?
2. Who are the wood-cutters and water-drawers mentioned in verse 29:10?
3. How do two parties “pass” into a covenant?
4. What is the connection between the verse “*Atem nitzavim*” and the curses in the previous parsha?
5. Why can't G-d disassociate himself from the Jewish People?
6. How many curses were listed in *Parshat Ki Tavo*?
7. Which two leaders followed Moshe's example and assembled the people at the end of their rule?
8. With whom did Moshe make the covenant and oath?
9. Why did the Jewish People see only idols of wood and stone in Egypt?
10. What is meant by the punishment of “adding drunkenness to thirst (29:18)”?

Vayelech

1. How old was Moshe when he died?
2. Why was Moshe unable “to go out and come in” (31:2)?
3. What happened to Moshe's Torah knowledge on the day of his death?
4. How did Moshe foresee the relationship between Yehoshua and the Elders?
5. What did G-d tell Yehoshua concerning his relationship with the Elders?
6. How often does the *hakhel* (assembly of the Jewish People) take place?
7. Why does the Torah call the year of the *hakhel* the “*shemita* year”?
8. What sections of the Torah does the king read at the *hakhel*?
9. In what physical location does the king read at the *hakhel*?
10. Why were the men commanded to come to the gathering?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to This Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

Nitzavim

1. 29:9 - To initiate them into the covenant with G-d.
2. 29:10 - Canaanites who came to join the Jewish People.
3. 29:11 - The two parties place objects in two parallel lines and pass between them.
4. 29:12 - The Jewish People asked, “Who can survive such curses?” Moshe comforted them, saying, “You've done a lot to anger G-d, and yet — ‘*Atem nitzavim*’ — G-d didn't destroy you ...you're still standing before Him.”
5. 29:12 - Because He told them He wouldn't and because He swore to the *Avot* (Patriarchs) that the Jewish People would always remain His nation.
6. 29:12 - Ninety-eight.
7. 29:12 - Yehoshua and Shmuel.
8. 29:14 - With the people standing before him and all future generations.
9. 29:16 - Because these were exposed openly. The idols of gold and silver, however, were locked away by their owners for fear of theft.
10. 29:18 - Even unintentional sins will be considered by

G-d as if they were committed intentionally.

“Drunkenness” refers to sins committed unintentionally. “Thirst” refers to sins committed intentionally.

Vayelech

1. 31:2 - Exactly 120.
2. 31:2 - G-d did not let him because the power of leadership was being transferred to Yehoshua.
3. 31:2 - The well-springs of knowledge were closed up for him.
4. 31:7 - He foresaw that they would work in partnership.
5. 31:7 - That he alone would be the leader — for there can only be one leader in each generation.
6. 31:10 - Once every seven years, in the first year of the new *shemita* period.
7. 31:10 - Because the laws of *shemita* still applied to the harvest.
8. 31:11 - From Devarim: 1:1-6:9; 11:13-21; and 14:22-28:69.
9. 31:11 - On a wooden platform erected in the *azara*.
10. 31:12 - In order to learn.

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PARSHA Q&A?

Ha'azinu

1. Why were heaven and earth specifically chosen as witnesses?
2. How is the Torah like rain?
3. How is G-d "faithful without injustice"?
4. Why is G-d called "tzaddik"?
5. How many major floods did G-d bring upon the world?
6. What group of people does the Torah call "fathers"? Cite an example.
7. Why did G-d separate the world's nations into exactly 70?
8. Why is the merit of the Jewish People's ancestry called a "rope"?
9. How is G-d's behavior toward the Jewish People like an eagle's behavior toward its offspring?
10. Regarding the Jewish People's punishment, G-d says, "I will spend my arrows on them." What is the positive aspect of this phrase?
11. How does the idea of "chillul G-d" prevent the nations from destroying the Jewish People?
12. What will happen to the nations that conquer the Jewish People?
13. When G-d overturns a nation that persecutes the Jewish People, His attribute of Mercy is "replaced" by which attribute?
14. When G-d punishes the heathen nations, for whose sins does He exact punishment?
15. How will G-d's punishment change the way the nations view the Jewish People?
16. On what day was *Ha'azinu* taught to the Jewish People?
17. Verse 32:44 calls Yehoshua "Hoshea." Why?
18. In verse 32:47, what does "it is not empty from you" mean?
19. Why did G-d tell Moshe that he would die a similar death to that of Aharon?
20. If Moshe had spoken to the rock rather than striking it, what would the Jewish People have learned?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to Ha'azinu's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 32:1 - They endure forever.
2. 32:2 - The Torah gives life and promotes growth like rain.
3. 32:4 - He is "faithful" by rewarding the righteous, and "without injustice" by rewarding even the wicked for any good deeds.
4. 32:4 - All will agree that His judgments are righteous.
5. 32:7 - Two. One in the time of Adam's grandson Enosh and one in the time of Noach.
6. 32:7 - The Prophets. Elisha called the Prophet Eliyahu "My Father." (*Melachim II 2:12*)
7. 32:8 - To correspond to the 70 *Bnei Yisrael* who entered Egypt.
8. 32:9 - Their merit is "woven from" the merits of the *Avot*.
9. 32:12 - He mercifully wakes them gently, hovering over them, and carrying them on His "wings".
10. 32:23 - "The arrows will be spent" implies that the afflictions will cease but the Jewish People will not.
11. 32:27 - The nations would attribute their success to their might and the might of their gods. G-d would not let His name be desecrated like this.
12. 32:35 - They will eventually be punished.
13. 32:41 - His attribute of Justice.
14. 32:42 - For their sins and the sins of their ancestors.
15. 32:43 - They will view the Jewish People as praiseworthy for cleaving to G-d.
16. 32:44 - The Shabbat upon which Moshe died.
17. 32:44 - To indicate that although he was the Jewish People's leader, he still maintained a humble bearing.
18. 32:47 - That you will receive reward for studying Torah and that there is nothing meaningless in the Torah.
19. 32:50 - Because Moshe wanted this.
20. 32:51 - The Jewish People would have reasoned as follows: If a rock, which receives neither reward nor punishment, obeys G-d's commands, all the more so should we.

ROSH HASHANAH LIFE IN THE BALANCE

From: Liana

Dear Rabbi,
I see the astrological sign for Tishrei is Libra. Would you please explain the significance of this and if it has anything to do with the month itself? Thanks.

Dear Liana,

You are correct, and Libra in Hebrew is “*moznayim*” which mean balancing scales, and it has everything to do with the fact that the judgment of individuals, countries and the entire world is in the balance during this month Tishrei in which occurs Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The Talmud teaches and Rambam states that every person has both merits and transgressions. If one’s merits are greater, he is considered righteous – a *tzaddik*. If his sins are greater, he is considered wicked – a *rasha*. If they are equal, he is in the middle – a *beinoni*.

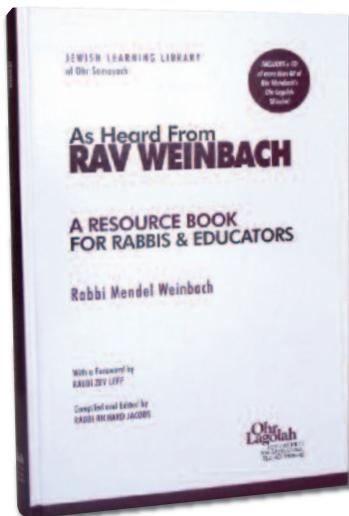
The same is true for a country or people. If the collective merits of its members are greater, it is considered meritorious; if the collective misdeeds are greater, it is considered wicked; if they are half-half the country’s fate is in the balance. The same is also true for the entire world.

If a person, county or the world is deemed to be righteous, G-d decrees life and abundance for them. If they are

deemed to be wicked, G-d decrees suffering or even destruction upon them. For an individual, this is as in the verse, “I have smitten you with chastisement because of the enormity of your sins” (Jer. 30:14). Regarding a people or nation the verse states, “Since the outcry of sin from Sodom and Amorah has become great, I will wreak destruction upon them” (Gen. 18:20). Similarly, in the generation of the Flood, when “G-d saw that the evil of mankind was great” (Gen. 6:5), He inundated the entire world.

Of course, this judgment is not only quantitative, but also qualitative. Therefore, there are some individual acts whose merit is much weightier than many sins. Conversely, there are individual sins that outweigh many good deeds. In this way, the judgment is very similar to the scales where not only the number of objects in each scale affects the balance, but also the relative weight of each object. The balance is dependent solely upon the judgment of G-d who is all-knowing and only He can determine the relative values of merit and sin.

Therefore, each person should think during the entire year, and particularly during the period of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as if he, his country and people, and the entire world are partially meritorious and partially guilty and that the judgment of all is hanging in the balance. If he commits one sin, he is capable of tipping the scale of transgression for himself and others, causing their destruction and his. Likewise, the performance of just one mitzvah can tip the scale of merit for himself and the entire world, bringing salvation and deliverance for all!



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ROSH HASHANA

An answer to a letter I received:

Although it is difficult for me to assess your precise level of learning and experience regarding the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur prayers, I will, nevertheless, attempt to address the questions and issues you bring up in your letter.

I would like to start off with a story that will help give us both a better perspective on things:

After an extended business trip overseas, Michael returns home. His wife and children have missed him dearly, and want to make up for the lost time. Michael, a loving husband and father, wanting to give each of them his love and attention, will relate to each of them differently. With his five-year old son David, he will likely spend more time playing, and limit the conversation to simple things. With his teenage daughter he might shop at the mall while catching up on the latest drama in her life. Perhaps he will have a romantic dinner for two with his wife, during which he will reveal his most intimate thoughts and feelings. Later, when Michael meets with his friends, he will relate to them in yet an entirely different way.

In the above story we find so many different personalities all belonging to one man. The same idea can be applied to G-d, Who relates to each person in a way that is best suited for that person. This is why when teaching about the Beit Hamikdash - G-d's home - Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov compared it to a suit - tailor-made to fit each person differently. The obvious question arises: Why wasn't the comparison made to a house? After all that is what the Beit Hamakdash is.

A house is a place where many people gather together, similar to the Beit Hamakdash. However, since G-d receives each person that comes to the Beit Hamakdash (and Synagogue) individually, it can more accurately be compared to a tailor-fitted suit. It is well known that G-d judges the Jewish People both as a whole as well as on an individual basis. Thus, regarding the Jews as a whole, the more accurate comparison would have been to a house.

The best way to maximize one's time on Rosh Hashana may be different for each person. Even if doing the same thing, no two people will do it exactly the same way. The

main thing is to be "real". Give G-d your time, and in that time give Him your total devotion.

Regarding prayer, it is generally best to be in shul to pray with others, since there is great merit in being together with other Jews, especially on a day like Rosh Hashana. If the prayers are too lengthy, and are likely to become lip service; or if you are not yet familiar with the details and nuances of the prayer book, I suggest to say the main parts, namely the Shma and Shemoneh Esrei. If you can add to that without it becoming an empty heartless procedure, speak to a Rabbi who knows your level. A good idea can be to read a Torah book you like while at shul. It is a good alternative for someone not yet ready to follow all of the organized prayers.

Rosh Hashana is a time for introspection and contemplation, to consider your past year, meditate on (and articulate) the idea of teshuva (repentance), which includes regret and abandonment of sin, and a resolve to recommit to following G-d's ways.

Think about G-d as the King of the world, Who governs over everyone's life in every detail, yours included. Ask for guidance and understanding in how to be counted among the righteous, and inscribed in the Book of Life. Rosh Hashana is a time to ask, from the depths of one's heart, for G-d's help in all aspects of one's life, especially in coming closer to Him.

In closing, Rosh Hashana is a day to make up for all the lost time during the past year. When we approach the holidays in the right way, then, even if life takes us to far off places, as long as we remain loyal in our heart, the time will not be spent away.

I hope these ideas help make your Rosh Hashana more meaningful. Remember one thing - G-d will certainly be there! The question is - will we?

With blessings and wishes for a safe, healthy and productive year, full of true joy and gladness.

*Shana Tova,
Rabbi Yitzchak Botton*

CHAGIGA 13-27

“If the Rav seems to you as a malach (agent) of G-d, then seek to learn Torah from him; but if not, then do not learn from him.”

Rabbah bar Bar Chana teaches this on our *daf* in the name of Rabbi Yochanan to explain the verse that states: “Because the lips of the *Kohen* guard wisdom and Torah; seek it from his mouth, because he is the *malach* of the L-rd of Hosts (Malachi 2:7).” The Maharsha points out that the *Kohanim*, from the Tribe of Levi, were traditionally the teachers of Torah to the Jewish people and that is why the word “*Kohen*” is specifically mentioned in the verse cited. Only if the potential teacher is a Rav who is also “kosher” in his deeds – aside from his greatness in Torah – then seek to learn Torah from him.

• Chagiga 15b

Rabbi Yehuda ben Rabbi Nachmeini said, “If the ‘evil inclination’ tries to persuade you to sin by assuring you that G-d will forgive you anyway, don’t listen to him!”

• Chagiga 16a

“On the three Regalim (Pilgrimage Festivals) all are believed, even regarding teruma (to say that it is tahor – ritually pure – and did not come into contact with anything that would make it tamei – ritually not pure).”

This statement in a *mishna* on our *daf* is derived in the *gemara* from the following verse: “And every person of Israel gathered to the city (Jerusalem), as one person, *chaverim*” (scholars who are honest and trusted regarding ritual purity). The *gemara* picks up from the word “*chaverim*” that all of the Jewish People have this status during the *Regalim* and are therefore trustworthy. Another way of deriving this special trust during the Festivals is found in the Jerusalem Talmud. A different verse there refers to “Jerusalem, that is built as a city that is connected to it together”, meaning that it is a city that unifies all of the Jewish People and assigns them the equal status of “*chaverim*” (Maharsha).

• Chagiga 26a

Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish both stated, “When there was a Beit Hamikdash in existence, the altar achieved atonement for sin; but nowadays it is a person’s table (through hospitality to the needy – Rashi) that atones for him.”

• Chagiga 27a

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Rosh Hashana is the birthday of mankind. The first day of Tishrei was the sixth day of creation when the Creator said “Let us make a man.”

The first man, Adam, was formed from matter taken from all over the universe, the creation of which preceded him. His head was formed from the dust of Eretz Yisrael, his torso from that of Babylon and his limbs from dust taken from every other land. (*Mesechta Sanhedrin* 38b)



Maharsha explains that since the entire universe was created for the use of man, Adam was formed from all its parts to symbolically give him domain over the entire universe. It was therefore logical that his head, repository of his spiritual and intellectual power, should be formed from the Land which is the most hospitable to wisdom — the very air of Eretz Yisrael makes one wise — and where the soul has access in Jerusalem to the Gateway to Heaven.

Abarbanel

ON THE PARSHA

By Rabbi Pinchas Kasnett

Nitzavim

This section of the Torah begins with the renewal of the covenant between G-d and the Jewish People which first took place at Mt. Sinai 40 years earlier. Here Moshe emphasizes that the entire nation is gathered together for that renewal: “The heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers...all the men of Israel, your small children, your women and your proselytes...from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water.” By contrast, in the description of the first covenant, the Torah states that “the people” accepted the covenant, but individual groups are not specified.

The difference can be explained as follows: In Nitzavim, Moshe is reminding them that they have seen a wide variety of idolatries in Egypt, Midian, Moav and the kingdoms of Sichon and Og. They have encountered individuals of great wisdom and understanding. As a result, he cautions them, “There may be among you individuals who, deep inside, have been influenced by these experiences, contacts and ideas, and may have doubts about your commitment to the Torah.” Moshe did not want these issues to fester in private. Rather, he wanted them to be aired in public so that he could remove these doubts from their minds.

The first words of this Parsha are, “You are standing today, all of you, before G-d”. The Hebrew for standing —*nitzavim*— connotes a gathering for debate, discussion and argument. The same word is used several other times in the Torah with the same connotation. Moshe’s intent was clear. Everyone, regardless of age, status or level of learning, was encouraged to voice his or her opinions and doubts publicly, before G-d and Moshe. Moshe was eager to listen, respond, and convince them of the truth. Moshe knew that there were doubts and issues. He did not want the people to feel that they were coerced into accepting the covenant. He wanted them to choose it freely after having had their doubts addressed properly.

If Moshe was concerned about the doubts of a nation that had just experienced 40 years of direct providential guidance, and encouraged debate and discussion, how much more relevant is his insight in today’s world where the truth and relevance of the Torah is under unremitting assault!

Vayelech

As the time of Moshe’s death approaches, G-d says to him, “The people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the land... and they will forsake Me and annul My

covenant... I will conceal my face from them... and many evils and distresses will encounter the nation.” Then G-d tells him that the people will repent and will say, “Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?” But, strangely enough, even after they have repented, G-d says that they will not be forgiven: “But I will surely conceal My face on that day because of all the evil that they did, for they turned to gods of others.”

All the commentators are puzzled by G-d’s refusal to accept the repentance of the nation. Abarbanel offers a unique insight into the behavior of the people, which is certainly relevant today as well. He says that the people were guilty of two transgressions: 1) The idolatrous practice of serving other gods. 2) Drifting away from the covenant and their essential connection to G-d. When the nation was punished as a result of these two transgressions, they repented by reaffirming their connection to G-d and the covenant, but did not give up their idolatrous practices. They felt that they could serve G-d as a “partnership” together with idolatrous practices. However, G-d makes it clear that this misconception is even more egregious than moving away from the covenant with G-d in the first place. Therefore, G-d says that he will *surely* conceal His face from them.

This misconception has been repeated throughout Jewish history. One cannot separate commitment, belief and attachment from specific behavior. One’s attachment to G-d and Torah cannot be in “partnership” with practices that are antithetical to the Torah.

Ha’azinu

Abarbanel relates that this Parsha consists of 6 separate sections:

1. General Introduction
2. The benefits that G-d has granted to the Jewish People
3. The transgressions of the Jewish People
4. The punishments that will follow these transgressions
5. G-d’s initial intention to annihilate the Jewish People
6. Consolation and G-d’s revenge against the enemies of the Jewish People

In reference to G-d’s benefits, verse 6 in chapter 32 alludes to four specific types of kindness: “Is He not your *Father*, your *Master*? Has he not *created* you and set you up as a firm *foundation*? The verses that follow proceed to explain this verse:

1. “Your Father” is a reference to the fact that G-d is the

continued on page twelve

The Days of Awe

RECONNECTING TO THE REAL YOU

BY RABBI REUVEN LAUFFER

There is no doubt that Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur definitely carry with them a certain feeling of apprehension. After all, we are being judged for all of our actions from the year gone by. How many people can honestly say that they did their very best the whole time? Or that they didn't hurt anyone else? If there is such a person I would truly love to meet them! The Days of Awe are so intensely powerful that we are taught that Hallel — the classic series of beautiful chapters from the Book of Psalms that are normally recited on every Festival — are not recited on Rosh Hashana because the forthcoming judgment weighs upon us so heavily that we cannot reach the true levels of joy to be able to recite Hallel properly.

And yet, the Days of Awe are also a period of the most incredible opportunity to reach back within ourselves and to reconnect to our souls in a way that is terribly difficult to do at other times of the year.

There appears to be a dichotomy between the two emotions — on the one hand we have judgments and verdicts of enormous repercussions for us; and on the other hand we feel a sense of freshness and perhaps even a frisson of anticipation of being able to start anew.

What we are being taught is that the two concepts can be balanced, but it requires one to make the other possible. Yes, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur grant us an unparalleled opportunity to start again with a clean slate. We can rebuild relationships that need to be rebuilt: with G-d, family, friends and even our own soul. We can redefine ourselves so that the “negativity” and the parts of us that we are embarrassed about can be changed and fine-tuned to become parts of us that we are proud of. But to reach that point, to get to the moment when I become a better, improved version of myself, requires the knowledge and the acknowledgement that I did wrong things. In addition, I need to *want* to change the way that I do things — to aspire to become better than I was. That is far harder than just “wiping the slate clean” by pretending that nothing happened in the past that requires my attention.

And along come the Days of Awe and grant us an incomparable opportunity to stand in front of our Father in Heaven and say the hardest words in the world: “I was wrong. Forgive me.”

In Ethics of the Fathers the great Sage Hillel teaches a fundamental of spiritual growth, “And if not now, when?” The commentaries explain that a person should endeavor to work on improving his character traits when he is younger because as he gets older those negative character traits tend to become more a part of him and much more difficult to redirect. However, Hillel is telling us not to give up. Never lose hope. Even later in life it is possible to stand tall and say, “If not now, when?”

There is a famous saying that we should not put off to tomorrow what can be done today (actually, my credo as a young boy was “why do today what can be put off until tomorrow!”). In other words, Hillel's words: “If not now, when?” If there is a time of the year when we should try to truly take those words to heart, it is now. As we stand at the threshold of a brand new year we have the opportunity to reach up beyond ourselves and reconnect to our inner dimensions, to the spiritual elements within us. “If not now, when?”

It is related that one of the great Chassidic Rabbis would spring out of bed each day and declare in a loud voice, “Wake up! Wake up! We have a guest with us whom you have never seen before, and when he leaves, you will never see him again: Today!”

There is another familiar saying: “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift, that's why it is called the present”. Personally, I think that it is a very beautiful saying. Even though it is not a “Jewish saying” I think that it encapsulates what Hillel sought to convey, and I also think that it can help us understand that “If not now, when?” is not just a catchy phrase. Rather, it is the doctrine we should use to utilize our lives to the fullest.

I recently heard a true story that causes me goose bumps every time I think about it. An elderly person made his way

continued on page thirteen

The Laws of ROSH HASHANAH

- There are two beginnings to the Jewish calendar year, Nissan and Tishrei - reflecting the dual nature of Jewish calendar - lunar and solar, respectively. Nissan is the month of the Exodus from Egypt and Tishrei is the month of the Creation.
- All the months follow the phases of the moon, and the years are adjusted so that the festivals stay in their appropriate seasons.
- There is a specific harmony and rhythm to the Festivals, which serve to blend the physical and spiritual worlds, and to join nature with the human life-cycle.
- The festival of Rosh Hashana lasts for two days, even in Israel where all other festivals are only one day.
- Prohibition of *melacha* (certain types of work). Exceptions - food preparation, carrying, transferring or increasing fire.
- The obligations to honor and enjoy the Festival are fulfilled by preparations like bathing, haircuts, special (new) clothing and cleaning the house. A husband must buy new clothing or jewelry for his wife. Treats are given to the children.
- The woman of the household lights candles before sunset of the first night and a half hour after sunset on the second night of Rosh Hashana and recites blessings over the candles.
- The festival is sanctified in words (*Kiddush*) over wine at the night and also during the day, before the meals.
- Foods representing joy and blessing are eaten at the night meals, and prayers are recited for a good year using puns based on the names and nature of the foods (*simanim*) - fish head, carrots, pomegranate (lettuce, raisin, celery).
- Two festive meals each day.
- Guests! Maimonides - "One who celebrates but closes his door to the less fortunate is engaged in joy of the stomach and not joy of a mitzvah."
- Special greeting for the first night of Rosh Hashana:
"Be inscribed and sealed for a good year!"
To a man - "*Leshana tova tikateiv v'techateim!*"
To a woman - "*Leshana tova tikateivi vetichatemi!*"
- The Silent Prayer (*Amidah*) of Rosh Hashana has three essential components:
Kingship (Majesty)
Memories (Judgment)
Shofar (Torah / Sinai)
There are ten verses for each component - three each from Torah, Prophets and Writings, plus one additional verse from the Torah.

Laws of Shofar Blowing:

- The commandment to hear the shofar blowing requires conscious intent to fulfill the mitzvah.
- The shofar blower recites two blessings; the community must listen to the blessings and respond "Amen" to each one. (One should not say "*Baruch hu uvaruch sh'mo*" to these blessings.)
- One should stand during the recitation of the blessings and for all of the shofar blasts.
It is forbidden to speak from the beginning of the first blessing until after the final shofar blast (at the end of Mussaf).
- *Havdala* - concluding blessing over wine.

ROSH HASHANAH Q&A ?

1. Why do we blow the shofar during the month of Elul?
2. Where in the written Torah text does it tell us explicitly that the first day of Tisrei is Rosh Hashanah?
3. We eat apples dipped in honey to symbolize a sweet year. Why do we choose apples above other sweet fruits?
4. What two blessings do we say before sounding the shofar?
5. Which Book of *Tanach* does the beginning of the *Tashlich* prayer come from?
6. What three barren women were 'remembered' by G-d on Rosh Hashanah?
7. A person's yearly allowance is fixed on Rosh Hashanah, except for three types of expenses. What are they?
8. We refer to the binding of Isaac in our prayers when we say: "Answer us as You answered Abraham our father on Mount Moriah..." What was Abraham's prayer on Mount Moriah?
9. Why, even in Israel, are there two days of Rosh Hashanah, whereas other festivals in Israel are celebrated for only one day?
10. What halacha applies to the *shehechyanu* blessing on the second night of Rosh Hashanah which does not apply on the second night of any other holiday?

ROSH HASHANAH Q&A!

Answers to Rosh Hashanah's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. After the sin of the golden calf, Moshe went up to Mount Sinai to receive the second set of Tablets on Rosh Chodesh Elul. On that day, the Jewish People sounded the shofar to remind themselves to stray no more after idol worship. Also, the sound of the shofar strikes awe into our hearts and inspires us to return to the ways of Torah.
 - *Mishna Berura and Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim 581*
2. Nowhere. The Torah calls it "a day of shofar blowing." (This is one of many examples showing how our observance depends on the continuous oral tradition dating back to Mount Sinai).
 - *Bamidbar 29:1*
3. Isaac blessed Jacob with the words: "The fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed..." (*Bereishis 27:27*). The Talmud identifies this "field" as an apple orchard.
 - *Ta'anis 29b, Biyur Hagra*
4. "Blessed are You... who has commanded us to hear the sound of the shofar," and the *shehechyanu* blessing.
 - *Orach Chaim 581:2*
5. The Book of Micha (7:18-20).
6. Sara, Rachel and Chana. On Rosh Hashanah it was decreed that these barren women would bear children.
 - *Tractate Rosh Hashanah 10b*
7. Expenses for Shabbat, Yom Tov, and the cost of one's children's Torah education.
 - *Ba'er Hetaiv Orach Chaim 242:1*
8. He prayed that Mount Moriah should remain a place of prayer for all future generations (*Onkelos 22:14*). Also, he prayed that his sacrifice of the ram should be considered as though he had actually sacrificed Isaac.
 - *Rashi 22:13*
9. Before our current exile, we did not have a fixed calendar as we do today. Rather, the Supreme Torah court in Jerusalem determined our calendar on a month to month basis. They did this on the first day of every month, based on witnesses testifying that they had seen the new moon. Therefore, the people outside Israel had insufficient time to find out the exact date in time for the festivals. The "two-day festival" arose to correct this situation. In Israel, however, the people lived close enough to Jerusalem to find out the exact date of all the festivals except Rosh Hashanah. Since Rosh Hashanah occurs on the first day of the month, even those living in Jerusalem sometimes needed to observe it for two days, if the witnesses failed to arrive.
10. On the second night of Rosh Hashanah it is customary to wear a new garment or to have a new fruit on the table when saying the *shehechyanu* blessing. Thus, the *shehechyanu* blessing applies not only to the holiday, but to the new garment or new fruit as well. (This is done in order to accommodate the minority of halachic authorities who rule that no *shehechyanu* blessing be said on the second night of Rosh Hashanah.)
 - *Taz 600:2*

Ha'azinu

DIGITAL TORAH

"Write this song for yourself and teach it to the Children of Israel" (31:19)

We are living in the middle of a revolution. Little more than 30 years ago, the idea that you could link any computer in the world with any other computer was no more than the twinkle in the eye of a few gifted programmers. And today, that twinkle, with all its benefits and problems, is an everyday reality.

The digital revolution marches on, and its limits may not be reached for many years.

At the heart of the digital revolution is something called the binary code. Computers, digital cameras and scanners, CDs, DVDs and whatever other media are down the road, all come back to the simplest code that can be — the presence or the absence of an electric pulse; the turning on or off of a microscopic switch. Every digital device basically uses this fundamental code in ever more elaborate ways. But the root is always the same — 0 for no current or 1 for yes current.

The strength of digital is precisely because it is a code. Provided the original code can still be deciphered, the message can be regenerated *exactly* as it was originally, whether that message is a picture or a sound.

Let's take the example of Morse code. Morse code was a system of communicating widely used before radio was sophisticated enough to permit voice transmission. It consists of long and short sound pulses. For example SOS in Morse code is "... — ... / ... — ...", where the dots are short pulses and the dashes are long ones.

The beauty of this, and for that matter any code, is that the entire meaning of the message can be reconstructed provided that the original code is intact. It doesn't matter how much static or noise of other kind of interference surrounds the signal, provided you can tell a dot from a dash the original signal can be reconstructed perfectly.

This is not the case in an analog system. In an analog system the medium becomes part of the message. If the medium decays, so does the message. I remember as a young boy in

England listening to the inevitable surface noise of my HMV gramophone, waiting for the opening bars of the music as the record spun at the dizzying velocity of 78 rpm. 45s 33s and cassettes weren't that much better. (Remember 8-track cartridges?!) All these systems shared the same drawback: the medium was part of the message, the pops and scratches of needle meeting plastic or magnetic tape being shlepped across a magnet in the case of a cassette was part and parcel of the sound of music.

The digital revolution changed all that.

This whole of this week's Torah portion is written as a song. On a deeper level, the whole Torah is called a song: *"Write this song and teach it to the Children of Israel."*

The Torah is a book. Books are a digital medium. Provided you can make out the letters, you can recreate the original meaning of the words exactly. A book is not a painting or a photograph. Artwork is locked into the physical object itself. If it is degraded, it needs renovation if the original intentions of the artist are to be realized. Eventually, however, all physical things must rot and decay. They must end. Even the best preservation cannot go on forever. One wonders how much of the Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile is still the original paint. In fact, how much to conserve, before you essentially re-create is an ongoing debate in the world of art conservation.

Words, however, are a digital medium. As long as you read the letters, the writer's original creation springs to life eternally. The same is true with song. If you can read the notes, you can sing the song the way it sounded when it was first sung, devoid of the scratches and the ravages of time.

The Torah is a book. It couldn't be any other way. The Torah is a song. It couldn't be any other way.

The Torah couldn't have been a photograph. It couldn't be a painting. The Torah had to be a digital communication, for the Torah had to be handed down to the last generation with its meaning as crystal clear as it was at Sinai.

Abarbanel ON THE PARSHA *continued from page eight*

ultimate father. Just as He created the universe, He also created mankind. This is what is meant in verse 7, "Remember the days of yore, understand the years of generation after generation." G-d tells us to trace back through human history all the way to its very beginning, and to recognize Him as mankind's ultimate Creator.

2. "Your Master" is a reference to the Exodus from Egypt, when G-d 'acquired' us as His people. Even though succeeding generations did not experience the Exodus, verse 7 continues, "Ask your father and he will relate it to you, and your elders, and they will tell you."

3. "Has he not created you" is a reference to the Torah as a

possession of the Jewish People. Verse 8 relates that G-d granted each of the nations of the world its particular portion. But the Jewish People received "G-d's portion". This refers to the giving of the Torah at Sinai, as it says in verse 10, "He discovered him in a desert land... He granted him discernment." By giving us the Torah, G-d "created" the Jewish people — a new creation that is unique and distinct from the other nations.

4. The final kindness is giving the Land of Israel to the Jewish People. This is the meaning of verse 13, "He will make him ride on the heights of the Land." This refers to the conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel.

The Days of Awe ...continued from page nine

toward the central Synagogue in Karmiel, a city in the north of Israel, one Friday afternoon. People were already there waiting to begin the Afternoon Service that would be followed by the Shabbat Service. During the prayers, the Rabbi of the Synagogue got up to speak and during his speech the elderly man suddenly began to search with his eyes for something. He looked and looked until he found a series of bookshelves on the back wall that were packed with holy books. In the middle of the Rabbi's speech he got up and walked quickly towards the books, and it was clear that he was looking for one particular kind of book. Slowly he proceeded down the long shelves till he came to the Babylonian Talmud. He stopped in his tracks and began looking with great intensity at the titles embossed on each volume. Finally, he pulled out a particular volume, Tractate Yoma, and with tears streaming down his cheeks he opened it. He found the page that he wanted and he began to read.

After a while the Rabbi came to the end of his speech and the community began the Shabbat Services. At the end everyone lined up to wish the Rabbi "Shabbat Shalom". When it was the elderly man's turn he introduced himself as Leonid and he told the Rabbi that he had arrived from Vitebsk, Russia, that very Friday morning and had been accommodated in the absorption center near the Synagogue.

"Forgive me," he said, "for getting up in the middle of your speech and going to the bookshelves, but I couldn't hold myself back. I was a small child, sixty-five years ago in communist Russia. We hid with our teacher in the corner of a cellar near our home, somewhere in the Soviet Union, and we learned Torah. I loved my teacher. He had a white beard and a shining face, and all he wanted was to teach us Torah. He learned Talmud with us and I was good at it; I was blessed with a good head. One day I had a question and the Rabbi began to turn his big yarmulka around and around as he did

when he was thinking. Then he said 'Ah, Leibele (Leonid's Jewish name), what a wonderful question!' and as he said that we heard the dreaded steps of the secret police. They smashed the door down and took us all out by force. As he was being led away, the teacher, whose name I don't remember, shouted to me, 'Leibele, Leibele, the answer to your question is in Tractate Yoma page forty two'.

"From that day on I saw no Talmud. Soviet Russia robbed me of anything that connected me to my Jewish roots. I went to university and studied medicine. I became a senior doctor and did not keep anything from my previous life as a Jew. I am not even sure what possessed me to come to the Synagogue today, but today in the middle of your speech I suddenly remembered that question of mine, of Leibele, with its solution in Tractate Yoma. I reconnected to the child I was. I not only found the answer but I found Leibele too!

"You understand, Rabbi? I waited sixty-five years to get the answer. I couldn't wait one minute more! As soon as I remembered that in a Synagogue there must be a set of the Talmud and that it contains Tractate Yoma I knew that I had to find the answer to Leibele's question, the child from that town who learned Torah with his Rebbe. That child who is me!"

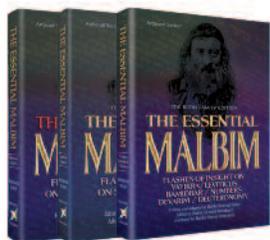
Hillel teaches, "If not now, when?" It is not just for the "Leibeles" among us. It is for each and every one of us. And the "now" that is being presented to us right now are the Days of Awe. May we all be able to recognize the enormity of the opportunity that G-d is presenting us with. May each and every one of us merit reconnecting to the inner, spiritual being that is the real "me".

And may we all be blessed with a sweet, sweet year. A year in which we see how each moment is truly a gift from G-d, and by doing so we can acknowledge and appreciate the "present" that has been given to us.

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