

Torah Weekly

PARSHAT NETZAVIM-VAYELECH

19-25 Elul 5784
22-28 September 2024

Torah: Duet. 29:9-31:30
Haftorah: Isaiah 61:10-63:9

ד"ב

Choose Life

"I call today upon heaven and earth as witnesses for you. I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. And you shall choose life, so that you and your children may live." – Deut. 30:19

Do we really need the Torah to tell us to choose life? Which person of sound mind would choose death?

One possible answer is that one must make a conscious decision to live and not just vegetate. And I don't mean to live it up by living life in the fast lane. To "choose life" means to choose to live a meaningful life, a life committed to values and a higher purpose. Did it make any difference at all in that I inhabited planet Earth for so many years? Will anyone really know the difference if I'm gone? Is my life productive, worthwhile?

It is told that when the first Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, wanted to bless Reb Yekutiel Liepler with wealth, he declined the offer, saying that he was afraid it would distract him from more spiritual pursuits. When the rebbe then offered to bless him with longevity, Reb Yekutiel stipulated that it should not be "peasant's years, with eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear, where one neither sees nor senses G-dliness." Reb Yekutiel was rather fussy, it seems. The holy rebbe is offering him an amazing blessing, and he is making conditions! Yes, he chose life, and he chose to live a life that would be purposeful and productive, and that really would make a tangible difference. He wasn't interested in a long life if, essentially, it would amount to an empty life.

As we stand just before Rosh Hashanah, let us resolve to choose life. Let us live lives of Torah values and noble deeds. And may we be blessed with a good and sweet new year.

By Yossy Goldman

History or Memory?

It has been said that there is no word for history in the Hebrew language.

(The modern Hebrew equivalent, "historia", is a word-lift from the English "history", which was pinched from the Greek "historia".

What goes around, comes around...) The absence of a word as central to any nation as "history" is striking. It's probably because there's no such thing as "history" in Judaism.

"Zikaron" (memory), however, a distant cousin of history, features prominently in biblical language and thought.

It goes far beyond semantics, cutting straight to the core of Judaism's perception of the past.

You see, "history" is his-story, not mine. The first two letters of "memory," however, spell me.

Without me there is no memory. Memory is a part of me, and history, apart from me.

Put differently: History is made up of objective facts, and memory of subjective experience.

As you might have guessed, Judaism is less interested in dry facts than in breathing experiences. It is for this reason that much of Jewish tradition and ritual draws on reenactment. We don't just commemorate, we remember. We don't just recount someone else's story, we relive our own.

A few examples:

Much of the Seder curriculum aims to stimulate feelings of slavery and bitterness (e.g., the salt water, bitter herbs, poor man's bread—a.k.a. matzah, and so on), as well as royalty and liberty (four cups of wine, leaning on cushions, and the like). In fact, in certain Jewish communities, the seventh night of Passover (the night the sea split for the Jews) finds many walking through pails of water to recreate that event.

On Shavuot we stay up the entire night in anticipation of the giving of the Torah on the morrow, and children are brought to synagogue to hear the Ten Commandments from G-d.

In fact, Judaism teaches that, in soul, we were all present at Sinai; each one of us personally encountered G-d. Consequently, G-d is not just the G-d of our ancestors; He is our G-d. He's not just the G-d we heard about, but the G-d we heard from.

The divine revelation at Sinai thus distinguishes itself from any other revelation described in other religious traditions. Central to other religions is the belief that G-d never shows Himself to the masses, to a community of commoners. He speaks only to the prophet, who

alone is worthy of divine communion. It's for the flock to trust implicitly in their shepherd's account of revelation. Not so in Judaism, which maintains that, indeed, the greatest divine revelation of all time was made accessible to maidservant and Moses alike.

Moreover, even as He spoke to a nation of millions, G-d addressed each one of them personally. As our sages teach, in His opening words at Sinai, "I am G-d, your G-d," He chose to use the singular form of "your" (Elokecha) - the "thy" of vintage English - over the plural possessive (Elokeichem).

This was one of the greatest gifts that G-d bequeathed our people, to include all of us in the Sinaitic display, for it turned our nation's most seminal event into a living memory, as opposed to a lifeless lesson in history.

Moving along to the ninth of Av, the day the Holy Temple was destroyed thousands of years ago, and a national day of mourning—its customs include eating eggs dipped in ash (just prior to the fast), sitting on low stools, wearing slippers, fasting, and lamenting like it happened only yesterday.

Come Sukkot, and we move into huts for a week to recall the booths we lived in throughout our desert trek. Like a figurative time machine, the sukkah transports us to that distant and formative road trip.

And the list goes on.

The point is, remembering is big in our tradition.

The following discussion seeks to highlight just how big.

The Finale

"Today I am one hundred and twenty years old," begins Moses' last homily. "I am no longer able to lead you . . ."

The end is near, or here.

"Be strong and courageous . . . Do not be afraid . . . for G-d is going with you . . ."

These moving snippets, and the time in which they were spoken, help set the scene and mood of the last public address given by a selfless leader to his (less-than-selfless) congregation.

And these are the words with which he leaves them:

Psalms Daily

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalms 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

Pirkei Avot (5:7)

There are seven things that characterize a boor, and seven that characterize a wise man. A wise man does not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom or age. He does not interrupt his fellow's words. He does not hasten to answer. His questions are on the subject and his answers to the point. He responds to first things first and to latter things later. Concerning what he did not hear, he says "I did not hear." He concedes to the truth. With the boor, the reverse of all these is the case.

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No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

“At the end of seven years . . . during the festival on the holiday of Sukkot, when all Israel comes to appear before G-d, in the place that He will choose, the king should read the Torah before all of Israel. Assemble the people, the men, the women and the minors, and the convert in your cities, in order that they will hear and in order that they will learn, and they shall fear G-d . . .”

Moses' final remarks to his people outlined the mitzvah of Hak'hel, the commandment obliging all Jews to gather in the Holy Temple every seven years to hear selections of the Torah being read by the Jewish king.

Then, following Moses' talk with the people, G-d has a final talk with him:

“You are soon to lie with your fathers. This nation will rise up and desire to follow the gods of the people of the land into which they are coming. They will forsake Me and violate the covenant which I made with them...”

“Now, write for yourselves this song . . .”

Which song, we wonder; and how might a song stop Jews from assimilating?

Maimonides explains:

“It is a positive command for every Jewish man to write a Torah scroll for himself, as the verse states, ‘Now write for yourselves this song,’ meaning to say, ‘Write for yourselves a Torah which contains this song . . .”

This Mitzvah, for every individual to write his own Torah scroll, is the 613th and final mitzvah to be recorded in the Torah. It is the subject of the last conversation between G-d and Moses that pertained to the people. It must somehow contain a recipe for Jewish survival, an antidote for assimilation.

But what might that be?

The single concern on Moses' mind that day, and later echoed by G-d in their conversation, was the future of this fragile nation—a future that would become less rosy with time, offering terrible persecution as well as progressive religious challenges.

The solution suggested by both G-d and Moses was the same: If Judaism were taught as a living experience, it would experience long life. However, if it were taught as a dead subject, it would, G-d forbid, be subject to death. Both the mitzvah of Hak'hel and writing a Torah scroll were established to turn the former prospect into reality. Hak'hel was the reenactment of Sinai. Here's how Maimonides describes it:

“They would prepare their hearts and alert their ears to listen with dread and awe and with trembling joy, like the day [the Torah] was given at Sinai . . . as though the Torah was being commanded to him now, and he was hearing it from the mouth of the Almighty . . .”

Might this explain why, of all biblical commands, Hak'hel stands alone in obligating (parents to bring their) children, including those too young to walk and too underdeveloped to understand, feel or appreciate what was going on around them? The Hak'hel experience was not just about the mind, it was about the soul; it triggered the subconscious, not just the conscious. As such, children, who possess as much soul as adults, were present. Somewhere inside their psyche, they reexperienced Sinai. This also explains why even the greatest sages were present when the king read the Torah, even though they were fluent in what would be read. For this was not a lecture or a refresher course; it was a trip. For a similar reason, it wasn't the scholar most proficient in Torah who read from it, but the king, “for the king is an agent to make the words of G-d heard.” A class is best taught by an expert teacher. The awe of Sinai is best reenacted through the presence and word of a mighty king.

In sum, Hak'hel was the communal reenactment of Sinai; it made things real again. But that worked in Jerusalem, in the Holy Temple, once in seven years. How would the other six years, outside Jerusalem, and in the days when our nation would be bereft of a

Temple, be charged with living Judaism? For this reason G-d gave us the mitzvah of writing a Torah scroll, to be written and stored inside one's home wherever and whenever they may live, and whose purpose it is to recreate the personal divine encounter we each experienced at Sinai.

Maimonides could not have put it better when he said that when “a person writes a Torah with his own hand, it is as if he received it from Mount Sinai . . .”

Thus, Moses' punchline could not have been more appropriate and helpful at that historic moment. Both of the mitzvot he conveyed, and the ideas they represented, were his last and best words of advice to a people facing great odds. Do more than study Torah and perform mitzvot. Live them, ingest and digest them, experience them—and they will live on.

What's in It for Me?

We're losing numbers, and fast. Currently, 72 percent of (non-observant) American Jews intermarry. Most of them, unfortunately, never received a Jewish education. That's problem number one.

Some of them did, however, which is problem number two.

If we want to get through to the youth of today, we must shift our educational focus from Jewish knowledge to Jewish experience—Judaism as a lifestyle, not (just) a topic for discussion or a paper.

How often have I heard someone who recently experienced Shabbat, a Jewish holiday or passionate study saying, “I love it, it talks to me, I can't live without it!”

Perhaps that's because for the first time in their lives they engaged in living Judaism, not laboratory Judaism.

Or perhaps it was the first time that they felt that Judaism isn't someone else's story, but their own.

By Mendel Kalmenson

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Tuesday, September 24, 2024-21 Elul, 5784 Passing of R. Yonatan Eibeshitz (1764)

R. Yonatan Eibeshitz was a brilliant Torah scholar, preacher, and kabbalist. He led a Torah academy in Prague, and later served as rabbi in Metz and in the joint cities of Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbek. R. Yonatan authored many works in the fields of Jewish law, homily, and other topics. Some of his more well-known works include Kereiti U'Pleiti, Urim Ve'Tumim (both commentaries on various sections of the Code of Jewish Law), and Yaarot Devash (homiletic sermons).

Wednesday, September 25, 2024-22 Elul, 5784

Passing of R. Yaakov Moelin (the Maharil) (1427)

R. Yaakov Moelin, known as the Maharil, was recognized as the supreme halachic authority

for Ashkenazi Jewry in his day. His customs, collected in Minhagei Maharil, are the basis for the conduct of Ashkenazi Jewry in many areas of Jewish life, especially in matters relating to prayer and synagogue procedure.

Friday, September 27, 2024-24 Elul, 5784 Passing of Chafetz Chaim (1933)

Elul 24 is the yahrtzeit of the revered Torah scholar, pietist and Jewish leader Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838-1933) of Radin (Poland), author of Chafetz Chaim (a work on the evils of gossip and slander and the guidelines of proper speech) and Mishnah Berurah (a codification of Torah law).

Preparations for Second Temple Construction Begin (353 BCE)

Inspired by Haggai's prophecy on the first of Elul, Zerubavel son of She'altiel, ruler of Judah, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the High Priest,

began the preparations for the construction of the Second Temple. The actual construction began exactly three months later, on Kislev 24.

Shabbat, September 28, 2024-25 Elul, 5784 First Day of Creation (3760 BCE)

The 1st day of creation, on which G-d created existence, time, matter, darkness and light, was the 25th of Elul. (Rosh Hashanah, on which we mark the creation of mankind, is actually the 6th day of creation.)

Jerusalem Walls Rebuilt (335 BCE)

The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem - which had been in ruins since the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians 88 years earlier - was completed by Nehemia on Elul 25 of the year 3426 from creation (335 BCE).

Passing of R. Elazar (2nd century CE)

Passing of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.