



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Devarim 5781

The Meaning of Tragedy

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered August 10, 1951)

Tisha B'av is more than the commemoration of the five specific historic events mentioned in the Talmud, foremost among them the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem six centuries apart. It is even more than the national threnody for a string of tragedies, beginning from the earliest times, and extending through the ninth of Av, 1492--the expulsion of Jews from Spain--and the same date in 1942: the signing of the extermination order against Polish Jewry by the unmentionable leader of Nazi Germany. More than these alone, Tisha B'av is a condition of the divine human dialogue, it is a quality of the relations of God and the people of Israel.

Man does not always perceive God uniformly. Sometimes He appears close to us, nearby, concerned, sympathetic, involved in our destiny, a loving and forgiving Father. "The Lord is near all who call upon Him" (Ps. 145:18). It is a source of joy and comfort to man when he perceives God in this fashion. But sometimes God appears infinitely remote, distant, faraway. It seems almost as if He has vanished from the world, without leaving a trace. God appears aloof, unapproachable, forbidding, uninterested, and ready to abandon man to eternal solitude. There is no greater agony for man than when God thus veils His presence, when He performs hester panim, the "hiding of His face" from mankind. When God, as it were, withdraws from the world and leaves man to his own resources, forsaken and at the mercy of the impersonal and brutal forces of nature and history, man's life is worse than meaningless.

It is this latter condition that is described in Tisha B'av. That black day was the beginning of the long, ages-old epoch in which God and Israel disengaged from each other, when a seemingly impenetrable veil cruelly separated them. The culmination of Jeremiah's Lamentations sounds this very note: למה לנצח תעזבונו לאורך ימים--why do You forget us for an eternity, forsake us for so long a time?

But if so many generations were born and died under the heavy cloud of this veil, this hester panim, since that disaster 1,895 years ago initiated this agonizingly long separation, then we are faced with two questions: First, how is it that we have not disappeared as a people? According to all laws of historical determinism we should have disappeared long ago. If there is no longer any relation between God and Israel, how can we account for the mystery and miracle of Israel's persistence? And second, how can we pray? Is it not futile to try to arouse One who in advance resists any communication? Moreover, how can we speak of such matters as אהבה רבה אהבתנו, of God's great love for Israel?

For an answer to these questions, and a solution to the whole problem of hester panim and Tisha B'av, we may turn to a remarkable insight offered by two of the earliest giants of the Hasidic movement. The Hasidic classic, the "בני יששכר," records two questions asked of R. Pinhas of Koretz, the disciple-colleague of the Baal Shem Tov, and the one answer that both gave to the two questions.

The first question concerns the well-known tradition, recorded in the Talmud, that the Messiah was born on Tisha B'av. Is it not unreasonable to assert that the purest of all souls, the exalted agent of the Almighty in the long awaited redemption of Israel, would come into this world on the very day distinguished for infamy and grief? Is not this the single most inappropriate day for such a historic event? Second, the Talmud records a most marvelous tale. It relates that when the enemy broke into the sacred precincts of the Temple and laid low its walls, they entered the inner sanctum wherein there stood the two Cherubim, the statuettes resembling the faces of young, innocent children, and from between which the voice of God would issue forth. When the enemy beheld these Cherubim, the Talmud related, they found that the two figurines were facing each other. Now this is most unexpected, because according to

Jewish tradition, the Cherubim faced each other only when Israel was obedient to God (עושיין רצונו של מקום); when Jews did not perform the will of God, the Cherubim turned away from each other. The destruction of the Temple was certainly the result of Israel's disobedience and rebellion. One would expect, therefore, that they turn their faces away from each other. Why, then, were they facing one another, the sign of mutual love between God and His people?

The answer is a profound insight into the nature of love and friendship. The attachment between two people is always strongest just before they part from each other. Two friends may continue their friendship with each other on an even keel for many years. Their loyalty requires of them no outward expression, even if they do not take each other for granted. Then, one of the two prepares to leave on a long, long journey. How poignant does their friendship suddenly become! With what longing do they view each other! Similarly, husband and wife are involved in the daily struggles and trivialities that cloud their true feelings for each other. But when one is about to leave for a protracted vacation or sick leave or business trip, and they know they will not be near and with each other for a painfully long period, then they suddenly rise to the very heights of mutual love and dedication, and they behold each other with new warmth and yearning and sweet sorrow. Indeed the Halakhah declares this as a mandatory expression of the right relationship between husband and wife: היצא היצא--when one is about to take leave for a long journey, he must be especially tender and loving towards his wife.

Now the love between God and Israel follows the same pattern as genuine human love. Tisha B'av was the beginning of the hester panim, the parting of the lovers. God and Israel turned away from each other, and the great, exciting, and immensely complicated relationship between the two companions, begun in the days of Abraham, was coming to an end. But before this tragic and heartbreaking moment, there took place a last, long, lingering look, the fervent embrace of the two lovers as they were about to part. At the threshold of separation they both experienced a great outpouring of mutual love, an intense אהבה as they suddenly realized the long absence from each other that lay ahead of them; in so brief a time they tried to crowd all the affection the opportunities for which they ignored in the past, and all the love which would remain unrequited in the course of the future absence. That is why the Cherubim were facing each other. Certainly the Israelites

were rebellious and in contempt of the will of God. But they were facing each other; God and Israel looked towards each other longingly and in lingering affection before they were pulled apart. And from this high spiritual union of God and Israel was created the soul of the Messiah! משיח was conceived in intense and rapturous love!

From this exquisitely intensified relationship before the long separation, we may gain a new insight into the relationship of God and Israel during this prolonged period of hester panim initiated by the destruction of the Temple. True and devoted friends never forget each other--even if anger and offense have caused them to separate from one another. Of genuine friends it may never be said that "out of sight, out of mind." Where there was once deep and profound love between husband and wife, some spark of it will always remain no matter how sorely their marriage has been tried. Absence, indeed, may make the heart grow fonder and the old love may well be reawakened. Those who deal with marital problems have observed that often a couple will undergo legal separation, and that very absence from each other will make them realize how they need and yearn for each other--and thus lead to reunion. A father may be angry with his son, so angry that they no longer speak with each other. But the father's heart aches, his sleep is disturbed, and his heart lies awake at night waiting for his son to call, to write, to make some small gesture towards reconciliation. All these are instances of separation tense with love striving for reunion.

Such indeed is the hester panim that separates us from our Father in heaven. We are exiled from Him--but not alienated. We are so far--yet so close. We are separated--but not divorced. God's face is hidden--but His heart is awake. Of course the divine love for Israel has not expired. It is that and that alone that accounts for our continued existence to this day. Certainly "with a great love has Thou loved us"--for though we are banished, we need but call to Him and He will answer. Like a wise parent, the Almighty may punish, even expel, but never ceases to love His child!

Have we any evidence of this phenomenon in the history of Israel in our own times? I believe we do, but I approach the subject בדחילו ורחימו, with trepidation. If one were to ask: was it worth experiencing a holocaust which decimated one third of our people in order to attain a State of Israel?, then not only an affirmative answer but even the very question is a blasphemy. Only a cruel, heartless jingoist could ever allow such thoughts to poison his mind. Yet the past is done and cannot be undone. History is

irrevocable. We may protest it and bemoan it and regret it, but it is there despite us. A tremendous paradox emerged from the paroxysms of our times, and we must strive to understand it: during one lifetime we witnessed the nadir of Jewish history, the descent into the very pit--and the rebirth of Jewish independence in pride and glory.

The Holocaust was the most intense, the most dismal hester panim we have ever experienced. God abandoned us to the vilest scorpions that ever assumed the shape of man. From our agony and our dishonor we cried to heaven, but our cries could not pierce the meta veil, which only reflected our shrieking back upon us to mock us in our terrible loneliness and torment. Auschwitz was the device of human genius as God turned aside. Buchenwald was built by human toil and intellect as God closed His eye.

Yet we survived the experience: crippled, maimed, decimated, disgraced, we yet trudged back from the depth camps and displaced persons camps, from the fury and wrath, and from the shameful silence of the onlookers, to a land promised us 3500 years ago. Providence did not allow us to be utterly destroyed. The veil of God ensconced us in misery; but through it, mysteriously, there shone a vision of love. In retrospect, right before the hurban of European

Jewry, the State of Israel was being providentially prepared so that the survivors might emerge into new dignity. God too followed the Halakhah: הִיִצֵא לְדֶרֶךְ צָרִיךְ לִפְקֹד אֶת אֲשֶׁתּוֹ. Before He “walked out on us,” before He forsook us and turned away from us, He provided for our perpetuation, for a new generation and a new life and a new spirit.

Job taught us a long time ago that there are no easy answers to the mystery of suffering. Certainly the unspeakable agonies of a whole people cannot be easily explained, much less explained away. But from the hints left to us by our Sages in the folios of the Talmud about the birth of Messiah and the position of the Cherubim, we may begin to search for direction and understanding and meaning of the history of our times and the mysterious relationship between God and Israel.

Even while intoning the sorrowful lament of Jeremiah, למָה לִנְצַח תִּשְׁכַּחֲנוּ תַעֲזֹבוּנוּ לְאוֹרֵךְ יָמִים, bemoaning God’s aloofness and our forlornness, we recite the same Prophet’s words in the same Book of Lamentations as he senses intuitively that *כי לא תמונו כי לא כלו רחמיו--the love of the Lord has not come to an end, His compassion has not ceased.*

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Straight from the Heart

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

Rabbi Mordechai Pinchos Teitz, was the rabbinic leader of the Orthodox Jewish community of Elizabeth, New Jersey, and also a pioneer radio broadcaster who founded and delivered, for several decades, the weekly program Daf HaShovua, which was the first Talmud class ever heard over radio in America. In the later years of his life, Rabbi Teitz had severe throat problems, to the extent that his doctor told him not to speak publicly. Despite these strict orders, however, he decided to deliver a talk at a simcha, or joyous occasion, that he was attending. He prefaced his remarks by saying that even though his doctor had given him strict orders not to speak publicly, he had no fear that any harm would come to him from his words, because they would be coming from the heart. This remark, although its medical merits may be open to question, can help us understand the opening sections of Moshe’s farewell address to the Jewish nation, as recorded in this week’s parsha.

In parshas Devorim, Moshe begins his farewell address to the nation by recounting some of the events that occurred

since he was sent by God to be their leader. We mentioned in last year’s Netvort to parshas Devorim (available at Torahheights.com) that Moshe’s long oration, which lasted thirty-six days, from the first of Shevat until his death on the seventh of Adar, poses a great difficulty for the commentators. This is especially so in light of the Talmudic statement that Moshe said the section of blessings and curses in the book of Devorim ‘from his own mouth.’ Some commentators explain this to mean that whereas, in regard to the rest of the Torah, God spoke directly through Moshe’s mouth, meaning that Moshe delivered God’s message to the people at the same time that he received it, in regard to the section of blessings and curses in the book of Devorim, Moshe first heard God’s message, and then delivered it to the people. Other commentators, understanding this Talmudic statement differently, and in a broader sense, explain it to mean that the entire book of Devorim was said by Moshe on his own to the Jewish nation, albeit through divine inspiration, and was later said over to him by God to be written in the Torah as he had delivered it. However we understand this Talmudic

statement, it certainly tells us that Moshe did not suffer from a lack of communication skills. This seems to be in conflict with what Moshe himself told God when He first asked him to speak to the Jewish people, as recorded in parshas Shemos and again in parshas Vaaira. There, Moshe told God “I am not a man of words I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech” (Shemos 4:10). Last year we offered an approach that reconciles these seemingly contradictory sources, but I would now like to suggest a different approach based on a comment of Rabbi Avrohom Shmuel Binyomin Sofer, known as the Kesav Sofer, on this week’s parsha.

The Kesav Sofer cites the Midrash Rabbah (Devorim 1:2) which relates the opening words of parshas Devorim, “These are the words (that Moshe spoke),” to a verse in Mishlei (28:23), “He who rebukes a man shall in the end find more favor than he that flattered with the tongue.” The midrash explains that Moshe is the one who rebuked Yisroel, and he found more favor in their eyes, in the end, than did Bila’am, who flattered them but eventually caused them to sin. The Kesav Sofer explains that the people accepted Moshe’s words, despite the fact that he had given testimony on himself that he was not a man of words, because his words came from the heart, and therefore entered into the heart. One is reminded here of the story concerning Rabi Avrohom Kalmanowitz of the Mir yeshiva in Brooklyn, who approached Henry Morgenthau, Jewish Secretary of the Treasury in the administration of FDR during World War Two and asked him to exercise his influence on the president to help rescue the Jews of Europe. Morgenthau was spurred into action, and his efforts helped create, in 1944, the War Refugee Board, which was instrumental in saving, by one estimation, perhaps 100,000 Jews from Nazi clutches. He later remarked that although he did not comprehend the Yiddish language in which Rabbi Kalmanovitz spoke, he understood everything he said, because of the emotional, heartfelt way in which he delivered his message. In the case of message, also, according to the Kesav Sofer, Moshe’s words came from the heart, and, therefore, the people understood what he was saying, despite what may perhaps be described as his throat condition.

Based on the Kesav Sofer’s explanation of the reason for the effectiveness of Moshe’s oration, we can understand what seems to be an interruption in the flow of his message. Moshe begins his words of rebuke to the people by telling them that the trip to the Holy Land should really have lasted only eleven days, but they ended up traveling in the

wilderness for forty years, due to their sins. Now, however, he tells them, they are ready to enter the land. At this point, Moshe describes the process of choosing judges to handle any cases of litigation that may arise among them. Why did Moshe choose this moment to mention this entire episode? What did the appointment of judges have to do with what he was in the middle of telling them? Rabbi Shlomo Goren, in his *Toras Hamikra*, explains this apparent interruption by referring to the Talmudic statement that the appointment of proper judges is worthy of keeping the Jewish nation alive and settling them upon the Holy Land (see Rashi to Devorim, 16:20). The purpose of a judicial system is to maintain peace among the nation, and in order for the Jewish people to endure in the land, they must care for each other and work together as a unit. Only judges who had a feeling of love for their people would be able to adjudicate their disputes in a manner that would maintain the cohesiveness of the unit. Perhaps, then, Moshe was offering himself as an example of how a judge should deal with the people. Although Moshe spoke words of rebuke to them, he did it in a way that made his inner feeling of love for them palpable, and, in that way, his rebuke was accepted. So, too, the judges needed to approach their task of judging cases in way that demonstrated their desire to bring peace to all involved in their adjudication.

Actually, the section of appointing judges that Moshe mentions during his oration was already recorded, with some differences in detail, in parshas Yisro, when Moshe’s father-in-law, suggested that he set up such a system. The Torah there tells us that this incident occurred ‘on the next day,’ (Shemos 15:13) which the midrash, cited by Rashi there, explains to mean the day after Yom Kippur. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, zt”l, explained this to mean that when a judge considers a case, he must have in mind the experience of Yom Kippur. Just as we all hope that, on Yom Kippur, God will judge us with mercy, and not on the basis of strict justice, so, too, should the judge strive to judge the cases he handles in this way. In this spirit, said Rav Soloveitchik, the Talmud urges judges to use the method of ‘peshara,’ or judicial compromise, in judging cases, rather than strict justice, in order to give consideration to the human weaknesses of both sides, and arrive at an amicable solution. It was, then, this approach to judging the nation that Moshe wished to inculcate in the men he appointed, so that they would follow his example of sincerity and love in approaching the problems that were certain to confront them upon entering the land.

Not Just Society, but a Just Society

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given in the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Jul 23, 2015)

In this week's Parsha, Moshe starts his speech by relating the story of the Jews going to Eretz Yisroel. Their departure from Har Sinai and going through the midbar. The Meraglim story at the end of the forty years. What countries they went through and conquered. It's all one theme. However, there is a strange tangent at the beginning, in 1:8: *Re'ei natati lifneichem es ha'aretz, bo'u u'rshu es ha'aretz asher nishba Hashem la-avoseichem*, etc. Moshe reveals that Hashem wants them to go into Eretz Yisroel. This journey continues in pasuk yud tes. However, in-between, in the pesukim 10 – 18, there seems to be a tangent about appointing dayanim. Moshe tells the people: you need to have judges. And he talks about how he found *anashim chachamim vi-yeduim* and made them *sarei alafim* and *sarei meyos*. And he gave them instructions—*lo sakiru panim ba-mishpat*, etc. What does all of this have to do with the story of going from Har Sinai to Eretz Yisroel? What is this tangent doing here? There are many answers to this question.

The Ramban gives a very pashut answer. He says that it is all part of going to Eretz Yisroel. What does it mean to be going into Eretz Yisroel? How do you get ready to go? You need judges that will not be *sakiru panim ba-mishpat*—*ka-katan, ka-gadol tishma'un*—*ki ha-mishpat le-Y'lokim hu—shomoa bein acheichem u-shfat'tem tzedek*. If you don't have an organized, just society—with people who will defend the weak and save the underprivileged from their oppressors and judge fairly and ensure justice—then you are not ready to have a country in Eretz Yisroel. It's not enough to have the military might to conquer it. You need to have a basis for a just, organized society there. So Ramban explains that Moshe is telling them: Now you are ready to go into Eretz Yisroel. Specifically, because now you have shoftim, you can live in a civilized fashion in Eretz Yisroel. The Rav once said that there is a mitzva of minuy dayanim. For the minuy dayanim in Eretz Yisroel, you need to have dayanim in every area. While in contrast, in chutz la-aretz, you only need a Beis Din that is geographically accessible to everyone. But there, you don't need it *be-khol ir va-ir*. That's the simple pshat. You only need one in the general area in case people need it. You don't need a Beis Din keeping their eye on and putting their imprint on every city. And the Rav once said that he thinks that the additional chiyuv to have dayanim everywhere in Eretz Yisroel is a kiyum in yishuv Eretz

Yisroel. Part of which is not just having Jews living here—as opposed to Goyim, or simply no one living there—but to have a Jewish society. And that means to have dayanim who can stand up for Torah values and make sure that the society keeps to them in an organized fashion. And the Rav once pointed out, as well, if you look at the connection between the Parshas Devarim and its haftarah, you see that on the one hand, the haftarah predicts the churban and Tisha b'Av, and the Parsha discusses the chet ha-meraglim, which is the root of Tisha b'Av. But on another level, why does the haftarah say there is going to be a churban? Because *Eicha hay'ta le-zona kirya ne'emana m'leyati mishpat; tzedek yalin ba—ve-ata meratzchim* (Yeshaya 1:21). Yerushalyim used to be an ir of tzedek and then became a place of *Sorayich sorerim ve-chavrei ganovim kulo ohev shochad ve-rodef shalmonim* (Yeshaya 1:23). The exact opposite of what Hashem wants. Here it says not to have bribes and favoritism. And there, why was Yerushalayim destroyed? Because it was supposed to be a place of Mishpat, and it turned into a place of perversion of justice. And how will it be redeemed again? *Tzion ba-mishpat tipadeh, ve-shaveha bi-tzdaka*. The only way back to Geula is through Mishpat. The Rav says: In the Parsha, we learn that yishuv Eretz Yisroel is not only about politics and the military. It's about having a society based on justice. It's about minuy dayanim. And we find the same theme in the haftarah. Likewise, Ramban says: As long as you have this, you will be zoche for Eretz Yisroel. Once you pervert that justice, and you don't have sound shoftim and shotrim, and you don't have values organizing the social fabric, then you will not be able to have a society. But, as we prepare to mourn on Tisha b'Av, we want to recognize that geulas Yerushalayim does not just come from a building or conquest, or a nation and an army defeating the goyim. But it comes from the inner redemption of society—a Jewish society based on the Torah values of justice. And one way we work to bring back the Beis Hamikdash is *Tzion ba-mishpat tipadeh, ve-shaveha bi-tzdaka*. Therefore, we need to ensure that our society is Toradik as much as possible by having the shoftim and shotrim and having the values of justice organized not on the principles of might-make-right and money-talks. We want it based on *lo sakiru panim and ka-katan, ka-gadol tishmaun*. And in zechut of that, we will be able to see the Geula Sheleima be-meheira. Amein!

Consistency in Avodas Hashem

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

With this week's parsha, Parshas Devarim, we begin the fifth and final book of Chumash, also known as Mishneh Torah. Mishneh Torah is the masterful and poetic 'good bye letter' (soliloquy) of Moshe Rabbeinu, to the nation which he has loved and led for forty years.

As the nation stands poised to enter the Land, leaving Moshe behind on ever la'Yarden (the eastern side of the Jordan River), it is in Sefer Devarim that Moshe reminds the nation of their desert travels, the high and low moments they faced together, and of their responsibility to G-d, the Land and to each other.

Towards the very beginning of the parsha, the pasuk tells us that Moshe says: *וְאָמַר אֲלֵכֶם בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר לֹא אֶאֱכָל לְבַדִּי: שְׂאֵת אֶתְכֶם, and I said to you at that time, saying, 'I cannot carry you alone'. And why could Moshe not carry the nation alone? ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הִרְבָּה אֶתְכֶם וְהִנֵּנְכֶם הַיּוֹם כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם - לָרֹב - Because Hashem, your G-d, has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as the stars of the heavens in abundance (Devarim 1:9-10).*

Rashi (ibid) comments:

וכי ככוכבי השמים היו באותו היום, והלא לא היו אלא ששים רבוא, מהו והנכם היום? הנכם משולים כיום - קיימים לעולם כחמה וכלבנה וככוכבים.

Were they like the stars of the heaven on that day? Were they not only six hundred thousand in number? What, then, is meant by 'and behold, you are today'? It means: behold you are compared to the 'day', lasting eternally, like the sun, and like the moon and like the stars.

It is interesting and compelling to consider that while here Moshe compares the Bnei Yisrael to the abundance of stars, elsewhere in the Torah we find the Bnei Yisrael compared to the sand on the sea shore. In the aftermath of the Akeidas Yitzchak (the Binding of Isaac), Avraham receives a Divine promise:

כִּי-בָרַךְ אֲבְרָהָם, וְהִרְבָּה אֲרֻבָּה אֶת-זַרְעוֹ כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְכַחֹל, אֲשֶׁר עַל-שֹׁפֵת הַיָּם; וְיִרְשׁ זַרְעוֹ, אֶת שְׂעַר אֲנָבִיו.

For I will surely bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand that is on the seashore, and your descendants will inherit the cities of their enemies (Bereishis 22:17).

Why are we sometimes compared to the stars, and at other times compared to the sand?

Rav Yitzchok Eizik Chover, a talmid of Rav Menachem Mendel of Shklov, who was a talmid of the Vilna Gaon,

suggests a very beautiful answer as to why the Torah compares us to BOTH the stars and the sand. He suggests that "If all that was meant to be revealed was that our number will be great, then either of the comparisons would suffice. But that is not the case.

"The aspect of stars is that each possesses its own defined style of ohr, light or twinkle. As such, in the comparison to stars, the quality revealed is that Klal Yisrael is composed of individual members, each with their own tachlis (purpose) in revealing Hashem's kavod (honor) in His world. Each member of our nation represents a star that must shine bright through the darkness of our world.

"But that doesn't end the responsibility of an eved Hashem! His responsibility is to be part of the tzibbur, the entire sense of community that is Knesses Yisrael, and be similar to sand, which differs from the soil of the land, for it meshes together and scoops as a unit. Thus, Klal Yisrael is to be a composite, a unit consisting of shishim ribui, six hundred thousand souls, each projecting its own dimension of spiritual ohr into Hashem's creation ...

"A great person once said that Klal Yisrael is indeed the identity of a corporation, composed of the ultimate individual whose avodah in life is to reveal light within the totality of the ohr that all of Klal Yisrael projects to the world, for this represents the spiritual destiny of the nation that can never truly be counted" (Rabbi Ahron Rapps, "The Nation That Can't Be Counted". I am indebted to Esta Adelman for sharing this beautiful piece by Rabbi Rapps with me).

With this beautiful chiddush (novel Torah insight) we can understand why our nation is compared to both stars and sand. While each star shines brightly in its own right, and has intrinsic worth as it stands on its own, each grain of sand is only meaningful and purposeful when it joins together with other grains of sand.

So too, Am Yisrael. Our nation is made up of many individuals, each one important and valuable in his or her own right. Each individual has a task to accomplish in this world, each member shines in his or her own way, unique and distinguished from everyone and anyone else. Each person has a light that no one else has. In this way, we are compared to the stars.

However! Woe unto he who forgets that Am Yisrael is also compared to the sand of the sea. Just like one grain

of sand is meaningless and utterly purposeless on its own, but only has worth and weight when it joins together with other grains of sand (think of sandbags which are filled with individual grains of sand working together to protect against the enemy), so too every member of Klal Yisrael. Our greatest strength comes forth when we join together, each individual clinging to another, to form the great klal that is our people.

What a powerful lesson and reminder this is for all of us as we mourn through these Nine Calamitous Days and

Judging Our People Favorably

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's Torah portion, parashat Devarim, is always read prior to Tisha b'Av, the fast of the Ninth of Av (observed on Saturday night, July 17th and Sunday, July 18, 2021) which commemorates the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem.

The parallel prophetic reading, the Haftarah, is from the book of Isaiah 1-27. The Haftarah opens with the words, *חֲזוֹן יִשְׁעִיָהוּ*, the vision of Isaiah—hence the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av is known as Shabbat Chazon, alluding to the vision of Isaiah in which he profoundly laments the underlying causes of the destruction.

The prophecy of Isaiah is a stirring and heart-rending prophecy. The prophet calls heavens and earth to serve as witnesses to the recalcitrance of the Jewish people. Even the ox, says the prophet, knows his owner, and the donkey knows the source of his nourishment. But, My people, Israel, says G-d, do not know Me, they make no attempt to understand Me.

Speaking in the name of G-d, Isaiah says to the people of Israel: As a result of your evil deeds, you've been beaten so brutally, that there is no place on your body that is without wounds. Your land lies desolate, your cities are burnt. Strangers inhabit your land and eat the produce thereof.

Isaiah adjures the Jewish people to relate to G-d with sincerity. He renounces the numerous sacrifices that the Jewish people bring in the Temple. "Who asked you to come to my Temple to trample my courtyards?" Your sacrifices are worthless, in fact, they are abominations, because they are brought without sincerity. When you spread your hands in prayer, I will not listen to you because your hands are full of blood.

In his final plea for the people to repent, the prophet beseeches them, (Isaiah 1:16): *רְחֲצוּ הַזְּכוֹת הַסִּירוּ רֵעַ מֵעַלְלֵיכֶם*

prepare for The Day of Tragedy, Tisha B'Av.

While each individual is very great, and very bright, when we stand alone and apart, no one person can bring the geula (the final and ultimate redemption). Only when we recognize our own worth (like stars) and then band together (like the sand of the sea), with unity and ahavas Yisrael, working as a klal for the betterment of all, will we - perhaps - merit the redemption, in our days and in our time.

מִנְגִּד עֵינַי הַדְּלוּ הָרַע, "Wash yourselves, purify yourselves, remove the evil of your doings from before My eyes, desist from doing wrong. Learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the victim, do justice for the orphan, take up the cause of the widow."

These powerful words resound today with surprising relevance, as if they were pronounced only yesterday!

Despite the searing words of the prophet, Isaiah forces himself to conclude his prophecy on a positive and optimistic note.

If only the people turn back to G-d, says Isaiah, blessing and goodness could be theirs. G-d will avenge his enemies, He will help cleanse the Jewish people, and will return the judges and counselors as of yore. Jerusalem shall be called the "City of Righteousness," the "Faithful City."

The prophet closes with a ringing pronouncement, (Isaiah 1:27): *צִיּוֹן בְּמִשְׁפַּט תִּפְדָּה, וְשָׁבִיָּה בְּצִדְקָה*, *Zion shall be redeemed with justice and her returnees with righteousness.*

These immortal words of Isaiah are a profoundly powerful lesson indeed, a lesson that in itself would certainly be sufficient. And yet, there is an additional lesson to be gleaned from within Isaiah's words.

The famed Chassidic leader, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, was known to passionately love every Jewish person, and would never allow a negative word about another Jew to cross his lips. Once, Reb Levi Yitzchak was confronted by skeptics who demanded: "Why are you so obsessed with never speaking evil of the Jewish people? After all, G-d himself, in the prophecy of Isaiah 1, speaks against His people. Recall, please, the verse in Isaiah 1:2: *בָּנִים גִּדַּלְתִּי וְרוּמַמְתִּי, וְהֵם פָּשְׁעוּ בִּי*, 'I have raised children and exalted them, but they have sinned against Me!' If G-d speaks against His people, why can't you?"

Reb Levi Yitzchak looked lovingly at his questioners,

and, with a twinkle in his eye, responded: “You misread the verse. The verse should be read as a question, ‘I have raised children and exalted them, and they have sinned against me?’ הֲיִתְּכֶן – *Ha’yee’tah’chayn?* Is it possible? Of course not!”

A long stretch of the imagination is required to interpret this verse favorably as did Reb Levi Yitzchak. And yet, he was determined to find the justification for the Jewish people, who surely did not merit favorable judgment.

Contemporary Jews today face similar challenges in these times of terror and mourning. Our people are in distress. They are confronted with uncommon challenges. And, although, there is much about our people that is deserving of criticism, we need to find reason, particularly during these times, to judge our brothers and our sisters favorably.

Time to Move Forward!

Rabbi Judah Kerbel

It was literally four years ago that I first got a FitBit. When I looked back at my statistics, it was actually July 25, 2016, and I am writing on July 24, 2020. The FitBit helps keep us aware of how much we move. In New York City, it is a little easier to get steps if you need anything, but it becomes easy to just sit and sit. Famously, FitBit advocates for getting 10,000 steps a day (which involves walking several miles total). But beyond that, it encourages one to get 250 steps every hour during a time range of your choice. This comes with a variety of both physical and mental health benefits. While we may practically have to do a lot of sitting for a variety of reasons, it is still important to take a break – and to move frequently. I even get a reminder – “time to move!”

Although it takes a long time for B’nei Yisrael to reach Eretz Yisrael – and they do not even get there in the Torah itself – we know that was supposed to be their destination. That is the promise that Hashem makes to Avraham, and Hashem makes it clear to Moshe and B’nei Yisrael that is the destination following their liberation from Egypt. However, we should not take it for granted that B’nei Yisrael always bought into that goal. On the one hand, at various points in their journey, B’nei Yisrael (or some among them) beg to go back to Egypt, where it was supposedly better. This comes up as early as at the juncture of the splitting of the sea, and it comes up throughout Bamidbar. In this week’s parasha, Devarim, we even have a reference to it when Moshe recounts the tragedy of the spies and how B’nei Yisrael did not want to continue on to

Given the life and death issues that the people of Israel now face daily, it is a great source of pride that despite the constant savagery of their enemies, Israelis have, for the most part, maintained their equanimity. In face of such brazen evil, would any other nation have such self-control as do the citizens of Israel? While there have been a small number of Israelis who have tried to take the law into their own hands and wreak vengeance upon the Arab population, the number of these incidents has been unusually small. Of course, let us hope they do not increase.

As the fast of Tisha b’Av draws near, let us reiterate the prophet Isaiah’s final words, and pray: צִיּוֹן בְּמִשְׁפָּט תִּפְדָּהּ, וְשָׁבְיָהּ בְּצִדְקָה, “*May Zion be redeemed with justice and her returnees with righteousness.*”

Eretz Yisrael – ולא אביתם לעלות – yet you refused to go up (Devarim 1:26); in Parashat Shelach, they specifically say נתנה ראש ונשובה מצרימה – let’s go back to Egypt (Bamidbar 14:4)! But in addition to that, there could also be the mentality of not going backwards but of staying put.

If we think about it, why ever leave Har Sinai? There is plenty of holiness to be found there! If we want to be engaged in a life of holiness, where better to do it than the very spot it was given? Rashi (Devarim 1:6) explains, based on a Sifrei, there was a great amount B’nei Yisrael gained there – we built the mishkan and its vessels, we received the Torah, we instituted the Sanhedrin. There was a great deal of accomplishment there – why change? Why move? Keep doing what we are doing?

Yet, Moshe says that Hashem exclaimed רב לכם שבת בהר הזה – you have sat at this mountain for too long! You cannot stay here any longer. פנו וסעו לכם – turn around and journey. Go forward! Time to move! It is time to go to Eretz Yisrael.

It is, of course, not a call to merely travel and to physically “move.” This is not just Hashem telling us to get up and walk so that we have a change of scenery. But with all of the holiness surrounding the Sinai experience, Hashem is telling B’nei Yisrael that they have not entirely reached their spiritual heights. After all, Eretz Yisrael is the holiest of all lands. There are mitzvot that simply cannot be done in Sinai that can be done in Eretz Yisrael (Mishnah Keilim 1:6). The command to move is not just so that we can live somewhere else, but to live somewhere else

where we can grow. Ibn Ezra explains *לכם וסעו* is like *לך לך*, the command Avraham received. Was Avraham's move merely about moving from one state to another because of economic opportunity or just to try something different? Avraham was on a spiritual journey to a grand destiny – to start a new faith, a new nation, a new way of life. So, too, the call for B'nei Yisrael is to move forward – because there is yet a greater destiny to be reached that requires moving forward. There is a special spiritual mission to execute, and it requires going forward.

There would seem to be an implied resistance to moving from the fact that Hashem is saying “you have been here too long.” Why are B'nei Yisrael resistant? It could be because of what Rashi explained, that there had been so much accomplishment at Har Sinai, so much holiness there, that they could not fathom leaving. But in Oznayim La-Torah, Rav Zalman Sorotzkin explains there is more to it. B'nei Yisrael were not ready to go because after the sin of the golden calf, Hashem did not want to “personally” guide them on their journey. Rather, Hashem would send an angel. But B'nei Yisrael were not satisfied with that – they wanted, needed Hashem on the journey with them. It was only when Hashem promised to go “Himself” that B'nei Yisrael accepted the command *לכם וסעו*.

The tension between *פנו וסעו* and *רב לכם שֶׁבַת בהר הזה* is an important one for us to consider from time to time. We might become very comfortable in our current circumstances, whatever they might be. Depending on the amount of changes and the magnitude of those changes we experience, we may feel stability and a routine way of life, and that can be very valuable. It is good for our mental health to feel that we have a handle on our lives and that we have a confident identity of who we are that remains with us.

Still, when it comes to our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, stagnation undermines our ability to connect. As life is normal, tefillah becomes normal, Shabbat becomes normal – we can really pick any mitzvah we do on a regular basis and realize that it is easy to just perform it the same way on a regular basis. But at a certain point, it becomes *רב לכם שֶׁבַת בהר הזה* – we have been sitting in the same seat for too long. We need to move around. Not even necessarily miles and miles – but to shake it up, take a walk, get those 250 steps so to speak, in a figurative way. How am I breaking out of my norm, my stationary setting, in order to think, see, and feel differently? What is the next thing I want to learn? What is one step to enhance Shabbat even more? What is the next tefillah I want to focus on a little

better? While we may accomplish a tremendous amount wherever we find ourselves “sitting,” it is still important periodically to move forward and to dream bigger in our relationship with Hashem.

If it feels hard to make changes when we feel like we need to make them, though, one thing that can be assured, as Oznayim La-Torah explains, is that Hashem is here to guide us through it all.

Over the last few months, our life routines have been thrown upside down, and I need not elaborate. Justifiably, that has presented numerous hardships for many. But whether this has been a particularly hard time or just a different, extraordinary time, there is room to reflect: how has our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu changed over the last few months? How have our experiences in performing mitzvot changed? What are the things that were good that we should go back to? What are the things that were better for me during the time at home that I would like to translate when we get to a more “normal” time? If I had a difficult experience, in what ways did that impact my relationship with Hashem and Torah? How am I moving forward?

Next week, we observe Tisha B'Av, which is one of the hardest holidays to observe. It is not because of fasting per se; I find Yom Kippur to be extremely meaningful and uplifting. But it can be hard to relate to Tisha B'Av. And I'm not even sure if it is because the churban took place such a long time ago. But even with antisemitism occasionally arising in alarming fashions around the world, there is a certain degree of comfort we have achieved in the United States. But one of the things we are asked when we reach next world is *צפית לישועה*? Did we yearn for salvation? It is hard to yearn for salvation when it is *רב לכם שֶׁבַת בהר הזה*. We have accomplished a tremendous amount spiritually in America; Judaism has had its many successes here. But we have become used to a comfortable way of life. While I do not wish for that to change in any detrimental way, there may still be room for us to reflect on what we are still missing. Can we live our blessed lives here and still realize we have not reached full redemption? Can we dream of moving forward onto something even better than what we have right now? When it is time to move, will we be ready to pick up and go?

The journey from Har Sinai ended up not being directly to Eretz Yisrael. We moved, albeit slowly. We do not necessarily need to travel numerous miles (at least in one sitting) in order to still be moving forward. But

nonetheless, we still need to be constantly moving forward, even a little bit, a proverbial 250 steps, to reach greater spiritual heights. Tiferet Shlomo says רב לכם שבת בהר הזה – Shabbat (שַׁבָּת) is our “rav.” As we go into Shabbat, we

perhaps avoid moving physically too far forward, but may Shabbat guide us into reflection to how we will achieve our spiritual פנו וסעו לכם, our moving forward.

Nahar ha-Gadol, Nahar Praat

Rabbi Yosef Mordechai Gokhman

At the beginning of Parshat Devorim, Moshe mentions that Hashem gave us Eretz Yisroel, extending all the way to nahar ha-gadol—nahar Praat. Naturally, a question beckons. Why is this river described as being great?

Rashi teaches us that the river is called ha-gadol because of its mention in the context of Eretz Yisroel. Combining several mamarei Chazal, he gives three mashalim intended to convey a greater understanding of the matter. Eved melech, melech—a servant of a king, is [like] a king himself. Hidabek la-shachavar ve-yishtachavu lecha—stick with a high-ranking official, and they will bow to you [as well]. Krav le-gabei d’hina ve-idahen—come close to a perfumer, and you will be perfumed [as well]. In other words, only due to its association with the greatness of another entity—Eretz Yisroel—the Torah calls it nahar ha-gadol. The river itself is insignificant. And this assertion seems to be further supported by the Gemora in Masechet Shevuot (מז:), which explains that the river Praat is a small river—being listed last among the four rivers branching out of Eiden (בראשית יא-יד). It does not even get its own pasuk there.

We might think that this is the end of the story. The minuscule (lesser) size of the river Praat now seems like an open and shut case. Or is it??

A Gemora in Masechet Bechorot (מה.) relates an incredible statement that Rav Kahana makes in the name of Rav Yehuda, who reports it in the name of his Rebbi, Rav: The source of all the waters in the [entire] world is [the river] Praat. Anyone who takes a shevua not to drink the water from the river Praat would find all the water in the world off-limits. Why would that be? Gemora thus explains that all the river waters in the world are sourced in the [first] three rivers [listed in Bereishit]. And those three are sourced in the river Praat.

An astute reader may gasp at this point, in unison with the narrator of the Gemora: But, as we mentioned above, doesn’t the Torah list the other three rivers before Praat?? And to our astonishment, Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak and

some say Rav Aha bar Yakov responds that the original, nameless river that comes out of Eiden and splits into four is none other than the river Praat itself!

At this point, we could ask: What do we mean when we say that someone is a gadol or katan? Now, a Gemora in masechet Baba Metzia (יב:) reports, in the name of Rebbi Yochanon, that a gadol is not someone who is actually a gadol; and a katan is not someone who is actually a katan. Rather, a gadol is someone who is not dependent for his parnassa on his father—let’s say, someone who is his own source. A katan, on the other hand, depends on his father to provide all his needs—let us call him a receiver.

If so, however, we really need to ask: If the nahar Praat is the source of the other major rivers, then it would mean that it is fully deserving of being called gadol in its own right. And if so, why is it listed last—implying that it is small? Why did Hashem need to call it gadol only because of Eretz Yisroel?

I once heard an answer suggested, based on a Gemora in Masechet Eruvin (יג:). Chazal teach that someone who pursues gadlut, gadlut flees him, and whoever runs away from gadlut, gadlut runs after him. There is a well-known example of the former in masechet Chulin (ס:). The Moon, created as one of the great luminaries, complained that two kings cannot wear the same crown. He wanted to be great alone. Instead, however, Hashem reduced him—he was left to be a receiver. Nahar Praat, it seems, is the example of the latter. It is the source of all the river water in the world—it is great in its own right. However, the river Praat decided to hide its greatness. It pursued anonymity instead of gadlut. The source of the other three great rivers is nameless in the Torah. The nahar Praat’s only mention is as the smallest of the four. Therefore, says the vort, Hashem gave nahar Praat a well-deserved place of gadlut, as a gevul of Eretz Yisroel. A gadlut it could not evade.

In a contemporary world, where everyone strives to be number one, to be the greatest, to make a name for oneself, this vort could serve as a valuable lesson.