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Va'etchanan 5781

The Mechanics of Consolation

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered August 15, 1970)

In their commentaries on today's special Haftorah, the Rabbis (in their Yalkut) tell us of the following imaginary yet very real conversation:

ר' חנינא בר פפא אמר, אמרו ישראל לישעיהו: ישעיהו רבינו תאמר שלא באת לנחם אלא לאותו הדור שחורב בהמ"ק בימיו? אמר להם, לכל הדורות באתי לנחם. "אמר אלוקיכם" אין כתיב כאן אלא "יאמר אלוקיכם."

Israel said to Isaiah: Isaiah, our Teacher, would you say that your consolations were directed only to that generation in whose days the Temple was destroyed? Said Isaiah to them: No, I have come to console all the generations. For it is not written, "comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, said your God," but it says "comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, sayeth (or: will say) your God."

Consolation, then, is not an act in isolation. It is a process, and it applies not only to one specific time, but it is relevant to all times. It is therefore worth pondering: what does this subtle yet powerful psychological transformation consist of? What are the mechanics of this profound personal redemption which we call *nechama*?

I ask this not only as an abstract or rhetorical question. There are practical consequences. People are caught up in the depths of despair and grief. What should or can consolation mean to them? Or, the *menachamim*, those who go to console the mourners: very often they are at a loss, they do not know how to translate their good wishes into acceptable words. That is why they often do the wrong thing, why the task of offering condolences is often so difficult, why otherwise intelligent people are frequently reduced to silly prattle.

Furthermore, in the history of our people we are the great Generation of *Nechamah*. We are the generation that has gone from the depths of Auschwitz to the heights of the State of Israel. We have experienced consolation.

Therefore, it behooves us to understand it, so that we can better understand ourselves and the times in which we live.

The answer to our question, the key to the nature of this phenomenon called consolation, may be found in our Haftorah, that beginning with the immortal words, *Nachamu, nachamu ami*. Let us adumbrate several items that emerge from a deeper study of this Haftorah.

First, in order to console properly, you must never understate or underestimate the extent of the pain and the grief. To be the proper *menachem*, you must acknowledge the depths and singularity of suffering. At bottom, all suffering is highly individual.

When Isaiah and the Prophets are told to console Jerusalem, they are told: דברו על לב ירושלים: *speaking to the heart of Jerusalem*, כפלים בכל חטאתיה *--for Jerusalem has received punishment from God, double the amount her sins warranted.*

Often we try to show the mourner that others have suffered more or at least equally. In one sense, this is helpful, for it lets the mourner feel that he is not completely alone, that he is part of the community of the miserable. But never, never must this be overdone. For to try to show the sufferer that his suffering is not really that bad denies him the uniqueness of his loss. And ultimately it is futile too, because it makes a mockery of the particular misfortune that only he knows so intimately and that no other can fully share.

Hence the first rule of consolation is to show that you identify with the sufferer insofar as possible, that you appreciate the sharp edge of grief, both its extent and its incommunicable singularity, and that you understand the sense of void and emptiness, the loss and the pain. That is what we usually mean by the word "empathy."

Second, successful consolation requires confidence

or faith. In order to receive nechamah, you must believe that it will or at least can come. It is not at all necessary to understand how it will take place--the true mourner usually believes that it can never take place through natural, rational means. Let it be so. But he must believe that it can happen, even if the means are irrational or supernatural.

Thus does Isaiah say to his disconsolate people: קול קורא במדבר, *a voice cries out in the desert*, וגבעה כל גיא ינשא וכל הר וגבעה, *every valley will be raised and every mountain and hill will be leveled*.

What is Isaiah trying to tell his people by these geographical lessons? It is, I believe, this: even as when they look at a mountainous region they cannot imagine it to be straight and level, so when they consider the peaks of their pain and the depths of their despair, they cannot believe that these can level out into normalcy. Yet they must believe! For the voice cries out in the desert of the heart and the wilderness of the soul, that if the Lord God wills it, it will happen.

In this sense, the source of nechamah is in the mourner himself. The menachem, the one who offers his condolences, can only assist. The consoler is at most a midwife of restoration and consolation, one who presides at its emergence from the depths of the heart of the one who sits in grief.

Third, where grief is the result not of accident or nature, but of defeat in a struggle, in an ideological contest or in spiritual strife, there nechamah derives from the sense of vindication. If one has gone down for the sake of an ideal, then his survivors can be consoled only when those ideals are justified in the course of time.

Thus does the Prophet say to his people, having suffered defeat not only physically and politically, but spiritually as well: ונגלה כבוד ה' וראו כל בשר יחדו כי פי ה' דבר, *and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh together will see that the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it*. The martyrs of Israel will have been vindicated when their pagan antagonists will bow their heads and accept the truth of the Lord God of Israel who reveals Himself to all men, justifying the martyrdom and the sacrifices of the holy ones of Israel.

Today, our nechamah as a people will be incomplete as long as the enemies of Israel prosper, as long as anti-Semitism is rampant--even if it be disguised as anti-Zionism, whether of the right or the left, especially the New Left, whether White or Black, whether by non-Jew or by Jew...

Finally, the fourth element we may detect in this Haftorah as to the mechanics of consolation is this: nechamah implies the replacement of the loss to the extent that it is possible.

Indeed, there can never be complete restoration for a human being. This is so, because each human being, created in the Image of God, is unique, and that which is unique cannot, by definition, be replaced.

But if there can be no complete restoration, the void can be filled subjectively, at least partly. A parent or a mate has passed on; a home can be rebuilt and a measure of nachas can still come into life.

When our mother Sarah died, her son Isaac was grief-stricken. Not until he met and married Rebecca did the situation change. Then we read: וינחם יצחק אחרי שרה אמו, *that Isaac was consoled after Sarah his mother*. After the sense of desolation and loneliness and emptiness, Rebecca -- as our Rabbis tell us -- brought back light and a sense of family and companionship into the bereft home. Rebecca could never replace Sarah, any more than Sarah could replace anyone else. But she could fill the void in the heart and in the life of Isaac. That is consolation.

So our Haftorah tells us of consolation. Those who were destroyed cannot be brought back to life. No one can fully take their place. But in the life of our ongoing people, nechamah means the return to Zion, the upholding of the desolated land, the new dignity possessed by our people after the humiliation of defeat and exile.

We Jews today know that the six million martyrs of the Holocaust are irreplaceable. No Jewish state, no prosperity, no new-found respectability, can ever, ever make up for the horrendous loss that we suffered. But to the extent that it is possible without Messiah (or even with him), the State of Israel is our nechamah. It is our only consolation, the only thing left we have to hang on to after we have reached the very bottom of the pit of despair.

Therefore, Israel is everything we have. Hence, any danger to the State of Israel is a threat to our only source of consolation and evokes from within the heart of every Jew an immediate response: that the demons of Auschwitz are coming to life again. Take away this consolation of ours, and we are back in the depths, the unplumbed depths of avelut such as the world has never known. If any Jew wants to know the source of Jews' loyalty to the State of Israel, he must know that our loyalty is powered by the past of having experienced Auschwitz. Zvi Kolitz was one-

hundred per-cent correct when he stated in this Synagogue this past year, that the secret of the success of Israel's army is not that Israeli soldiers knew what they were fighting for, but that they know what they are fighting against.

The current cease-fire, just begun by American initiative, is the only break in the escalating crisis that has gripped Israel since the 1967 victory. But, as we all know, it is not an unmixed blessing. It is as much danger as it is opportunity. It is something which holds the most serious consequences for all Israel and all world Jewry.

We must hope and pray that our Government will support Israel in the full measure it deserves. We should like to be proud as Americans in knowing that Israel is being helped by America in ways that the world does not know yet. But whatever may happen, American Jews must support Israel in its resistance to Egyptian trickery and Russian treachery--and what, Heaven forbid, may yet become American betrayal.

American Jews must not be found wanting. For this is our particular responsibility today.

Israel is our *nechamah*. Without it, *chalilah*, we are back in the pit of anguish. I do not believe the time has come to take with any immediate urgency the words of Menachem Begin in the Knesset, that American Jews must take to the streets to demonstrate. But we may yet be called upon to act politically and economically and socially. Then we shall have to take to the streets indeed, despite our bourgeois respectability and self-restraint, even if it means incurring the wrath of the Government and the population. We shall

Don't Give Up

Rabbi Joshua (*The Hoffer*) Hoffman z"l

Moshe, continuing his series of farewell addresses to the nation, tells them that they are not allowed to add to or subtract from the commandments of God's Torah: "You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor shall you subtract from it, to observe the commandments of the Lord, your God, that I command you. Your eyes have seen what the Lord did with Ba'al Peor, for every man that followed Ba'al Peor - the Lord, your God, destroyed him from your midst. But you who cling to the Lord, your God, - you are all alive today" (Devorim 4:2-4). The reference to following Ba'al Peor, an idol which many members of the nation had been enticed into worshipping at Shittim, seems to be incongruous

have to pay any price in order to stand at the side of Israel, our consolation.

In commenting on the double verb, *nachamu nachamu*, the Rabbis said: נחמוהו עליונים נחמוהו תחתונים, *let the upper world console, let the lower world console*.

Permit me to give my own contemporary interpretation of that Midrashic comment. If we want Almighty God from His Olamot Ha-elyonim (His Upper Worlds) to offer us comfort, if we want to be able to look forward to an undisturbed life, to a peaceful existence for our children and children's children, to a continuation of our people and an opportunity for them to thrive without threat and anguish and danger--then, *nachamuhu tachtonim*, we who inhabit this lower world must first offer our comfort to the State of Israel, we must first preserve and enhance this sole source of *nechamah* that has been given to us at this juncture of history. Only if we are successful in offering *nechamah* to the State of Israel can we look forward to *nechamah* for us from the Higher Worlds of Almighty God.

It is our hope and prayer that true peace will emerge from the present critical state. But no matter what happens, we are bound to act fully, with Jewish honor and resolve, to preserve this sole consolation which has filled the void in our lives after the Holocaust.

May we be successful in offering that *nechamah*, our support. And may we, in turn, receive *nechamah* from God on High, the kind of consolation that will bring peace to all of mankind.

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

here. The prohibition of adding to or subtracting from the mitzvos forbids changing the details of a particular mitzvoh, or changing the total number of mitzvos by adding a new one or subtracting one that is included. What does the worship of Ba'al Peor have to do with the requirement to maintain the integrity of God's Torah by not changing its contents?

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz, in his commentary *Keli Yakar*, explains that when the people worshipped Ba'al Peor, they thought that they were actually performing a mitzvoh. The manner in which Ba'al Peor was worshipped was that people would relieve themselves in front of it. Those Israelites who worshipped it felt that it is only

forbidden to worship idols if it is done in an honorable way. However, to relieve oneself in front of an idol really disgraces it, and therefore should be permissible, or even commendable. The halacha, however, is that the regular manner of worship of an idol is forbidden, even if that worship takes the form of a disgraceful act. The prohibition of adding to or subtracting from the mitzvos teaches us this principle. We are forbidden to shape the halacha based on our understanding of the reason behind a mitzvah, as those who worshipped Ba'al Peor did. Those who clung to God, says Moshe, and did not worship Ba'al Peor, are all alive today, in contrast to those who did worship Ba'al Peor. I would like to offer a different explanation, that also relates to the reading of parshas Vaeschanan on Shabbos Nachamu, the Shabbos following Tisha B'Av.

The Torah tells us, at the end of parshas Balak, that Moshe told the leaders of the people to take their swords and kill those people who worshipped Ba'al Peor. It also mentions that a plague broke out at that time which killed twenty-four thousand people. Rabbi Isaac Bernstein made a calculation that there were eighty-eight thousand judges, and each one killed two idol worshippers. Thus, in all, the judges killed 176,000 Jews, and 24,000 died in the plague. The sum total of Jewish deaths at Shittim, then, was 200,000, or one third of the 600,000 males over the age of twenty. In the words of Menachem Begin, who was describing the devastation that the Holocaust brought to the Jewish nation, we were tertiated - one-third of our nation died. When such catastrophes occur, the reactions vary. Some people lose their faith in God, and some are strengthened in their belief. Many believe that somehow God forsook His covenant with us, and thus changes need to be made in it. After the Holocaust in World War Two, one Canadian-Jewish philosopher, Emil Fackenheim, said that there is now a 614th commandment, to make sure not to hand the enemy a posthumous victory by allowing the Jewish nation to fade away. On the other hand, a prominent rabbi proclaimed that by allowing the Holocaust to happen, God abandoned His covenant with us, and the mitzvos are no longer binding on us. However we continue to observe them out of loyalty to Him, even though we really are not obligated to do so. Both of these reactions are rooted in the notion that our covenant with God is subject to change depending on historical circumstances. However, the Ramban tells us that one of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism is that the Torah will never change. Rav Mordechai Gifter, in his Pirkei

Torah, cites the remarks of the Rambam in his Laws of the Foundations of the Torah (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 9:1), that this principle is implicit in the prohibition of adding to or subtracting from the Torah.

As we noted in Netvort to parshas Vaeschanan, 5762 (available at Torahheights.com), Rabbi Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, pointed out that the Rambam, in his Laws of Prayer, writes that the widespread custom is to read Vaeschanan on the Shabbos after Tisha B'Av. He does not mention that parshas Devorim should be read on the Shabbos preceding Tisha B'Av. The main goal, thus, is the reading of parshas Vaeschanan after Tisha B'Av, and the reading of Devorim on the previous Shabbos comes as a natural result. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained that it is important to read Vaeschanan on Shabbos Nachamu because the parsha contains elements of nechama, or consolation, and we need to emphasize nechamah so that our nation can continue, with a sense of confidence, its spiritual work after the mourning period that ended with Tisha B'Av. The entire process of mourning on Tisha B'Av, Rabbi Soloveitchik said, can only be carried out because it ends with a note of consolation, as reflected in the prayer 'nacheim' - comfort - that we include in the mincha service that day. I believe that the message implicit in the mention of the worship of Ba'al Peor in connection with the prohibition of adding to or subtracting from the mitzvos of the Torah is one of nechama, assuring us that our covenant with God continues despite any catastrophe that may befall us, and that the Torah He gave us will never change no matter what suffering we may go through. Perhaps this also explains why we read of the revelation at Mt. Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments on this Shabbos. The midrash tells us that all of the mitzvos are actually contained in the Aseres HaDibros, commonly translated as the Ten Commandments, so that the revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Aseres HaDibros constituted the creation of our covenant with God. Reading this section on Shabbos Nachamu, then, constitutes a renewal of that covenant, in the face of the exile and suffering that we commemorated on Tisha B'Av. May God comfort His nation, and bring us the final redemption swiftly in our days.

Our Contributions to Torah

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

In this week's Parsha, we read (4:9): *Rak hishamer lecha u-shmor nafshecha me'od, pen tishkach es ha-dvarim asher ra'u einecha u-pen yasuru mi-levav'cha kol yemey chayecha vehoda'atam le-vanecha u-le-vnei vanecha*. Moshe commands Klal Yisroel: Be very, very careful. Guard your souls, lest you forget Ma'amad Har Sinai. Lest you forget what I am about to tell you, which is Yom asher amadeta lifnei Hashem Elokecha be-Chorev. However, when Chazal darshen this pasuk in the third perek of Pirkei Avos, they contend that it refers to the content of Ma'amad Har Sinai, about the substance revealed there—not just the event. That is—Kol ha-Torah Kulah. *Rabi Dostai ben Rabi Yanai, mishum Rabi Meir omer: Kol ha-shoche'ach davar echad mi-mishnaso, ma'ale alav ha-katuv ke'ilu mischayev be-nafsho*. Whoever forgets one word, once sentence, one fact of his learning, the Torah considers him chayav misa—he forfeits his life. As it says: *Sh'mor nafshecha*—guard your soul, *pen tishkach es ha-dvarim*—lest you forget these matters. Therefore, if you do forget some of these matters, if you do forget one sentence, one fact, one word of Torah, then you forfeited your soul. This seems very harsh. Just because I forgot one word of Torah, I am chayev misa??

The sefer Keser Rosh, which collects hanhagos of Rav Chaim Volozhin, quotes him as saying that it can't be the meaning of this pasuk. It's too harsh. Rav Chaim understood the importance of every word in the Torah. I am sure he worked very, very hard, harder than anyone we know, not to forget any word of Torah. And he doubtless recognized that there is nothing comparable to the madreiga one can achieve by working with all one's might not to forget a word of Torah. And still, he doubted that forgetting one word of Torah makes one chayav misa. How can you deserve to die for merely forgetting one word of Torah? So Rav Chaim Volozhiner says: This doesn't apply nowadays, at all. You should still try not to forget even one word of Torah. But there is no chiyuv misa for this. That was only in the days of Chazal, before they wrote down Torah she-ba'al-peh, before the days of Mishna and the Gemora. In those days, there was no written record of Torah she-ba'al-peh. It was all ba'al peh. Think about it. If you are one of the Ba'alei Mesorah—let's say Rabi Akiva's five talmidim whom he taught after all his other talmidim

passed away. Then, if you knew this Mesorah, and you forgot it...no one would ever know it for the rest of history. It would be lost to Klal Yisroel. It makes sense that during days when Torah was transmitted ba'al peh, a Tana—one of the Ba'alei Mesorah—who forgot his learning, would permanently diminish the Torah knowledge of Klal Yisroel. He would be chayev misa. But it doesn't apply to us nowadays, because even if I forget my learning, it is written in books in the beis medrash, preserved for posterity.

However, this pshat is very difficult because it's in the Mishna. Rebi Yehuda ha-Nasi wrote it during the period when Torah she-ba'al-peh was written down. And it was learned and paskened by the Amaraim, Rishonim, and then by Acharonim afterward—who all wrote a great many books of Torah she-ba'al-peh. Everyone in the world, except for Rav Chaim Volozhiner, assumes this halacha applies nowadays. So, why is it so harsh?

The Netziv has amazing chidush about this! In his sefer on Chumash—Harchev Davar—he re-interprets this mishna — *kol hashoche'ach davar echad mi-mishnaso*—perhaps derech drush. What does it mean “mi-mishnaso?” It means from his “mishna,” from his personal learning. He says that mi-mishnaso means from the person's personal chideshei Torah. Even nowadays, when the Torah she-ba'al-peh is written down, when we have a Beis Hamedrash and a library of six floors full of seforim, everyone has a chidush in Torah. Everyone has something to add, everyone has their cheilek in Torah - as we say in davening: *ve-sein chelkeinu be-Torasecha*. And perhaps no one had this cheilek before, and no one will have it afterward. Everyone has some new he'ara or pshat, some new terutz, drush, or contemporary application to the current reality. Everyone has new Torah thoughts. Says the Netziv, if you forget someone else's learning—Mishna Berura, for example. It's hard to grow in learning if you forget every single Mishna Berura. But you are not chayav misa if you forget a Mishna Berura because you can still find it there. If you forget a Tosafos or Rabi Akiva Eiger, it is still written in their seforim. But if you forget your own chidushei Torah, if you forget your own contribution, no one can replace that. Your chidushei Torah are so important, so precious, and so unique that if you forget, no one else will

be able to say it instead of you. And therefore, when are you chayav misa for forgetting Torah? When you forget *davar echad mi-mishnaso*—when you forget your unique contribution to Torah. This Netziv is amazing because most of us think—unless you are the *gadol ha-dor*—Ok, I need to remember what it says in the Gemora, Rashi, and Tosafos—as well as the Shulchan Aruch, Ramo, and the Mishna Berura; Rashi and Ramban on the Chumash, and everything else in the seforim I learn. That’s important to remember. But when it comes to my insights, my *chidushim*, I say: “Who am I?” I am small compared to the Mishna Berura, compared to the *gedolei hador*, or even compared to my Rav, my Rebbi from yeshiva, etc. And I am certainly nothing compared to the Rambam, and Rashi and Tosafos, etc. And, of course, that’s true. Nonetheless, despite that, I am greater in one way. I have my *cheileck* in Talmud Torah and my *chidushim*, which they didn’t. They had bigger, more important *chidushei Torah*—but they didn’t have my *chidushei Torah*. Each one of us has a *cheilek* in Torah, and each one has precious insights and *chidushim*. I don’t think that I am greater than anybody else—but still, my thoughts are my thoughts. And they are my contributions. Says the Netziv: We all have a contribution to make to the Torah. There is a famous story

about the Netziv, which illustrates this concept. When he was young and he wasn’t learning well, his parents said: Forget yeshiva, we are going to send him to be a shoemaker. He ended up staying in yeshiva, of course, and writing many important seforim. He commented that had he become a shoemaker, then after his 120, when he went up to the heavenly court, they would present him with a list of the seforim he was destined to author, and hold him responsible for not writing them. And I think that here he is taking this one step further. Even if you are not the Netziv or a Rosh Yeshiva in Volozhin. And you are not going to write a *Ha’amek She’eila*, *Ha’amek Davar* and *Emek ha-Netziv*, etc. You still have your *chidushei Torah*, whether you are a shoemaker or an accountant, a lawyer, or a plumber. Maybe it’s only one, or ten, or twenty. We all have our *chidushei Torah*, and it’s our job to be *machshiv* ourselves, to recognize how important we are. Says the Netziv, that if we forget his books, we are not *chayev misa*. But if we forget our *chidushim*, we are. Every single Jew has something special to contribute to Torah. And we shouldn’t underestimate that importance. *Aderaba*. We should be inspired by how important it is to Hashem that we contribute our personal insights, and we add to the project of *Yagdil Torah ve-Ya’adir*.

One Day At A Time

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week’s parsha, Parshas V’Eschanan, Moshe exhorts the Bnei Yisrael to go in the ways of Hashem and Torah, and the pasuk tells us: *וְאַתֶּם, הַדְּבָקִים, בַּה' אֲלֵקֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּלְכֶם, הַיּוֹם*, *you who cleave unto your G-d, you are all alive today* (Devarim 4:4).

Why does Moshe Rabbeinu add the word *‘הַיּוֹם, today’*? Is it not sufficient for him to say: you who cleave unto your G-d, you are all alive. As no word in the Torah is superfluous, what can be learned from the addition of the word *‘today’*?

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski zt”l writes, “In my work treating alcoholics, I have found that the greatest success for sustained abstinence from alcohol is through participation in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. One of the fundamentals of this program is taking ‘one day at a time.’ The addicted alcoholic cannot conceive never again being able to drink. Inasmuch as he has relied on alcohol to feel good, he sees a lifetime of sobriety as being completely unrealistic. There is no point in even

trying to do the impossible. Therefore, he is taught a new philosophy, ‘Take one day at a time. There is nothing that you can do today about tomorrow’s drinking, so there is no point in thinking about it. It is not impossible for you to stay sober just for today. That is certainly within your ability. So stay sober today, and when tomorrow comes, you can deal with its challenges then.’

“One of my friends would write down each day how many days he had been sober. When he died at age eighty-three, it was found that the night before he had written the number 16,472. He had been sober for forty-six years because he took it one day at a time.

“... More than one hundred and fifty years ago, Rav Moshe Sofer, the Chasam Sofer zt”l (d.1839) cited the verse in our parsha as teaching this concept. *וְאַתֶּם, הַדְּבָקִים, בַּה' אֲלֵקֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּלְכֶם, הַיּוֹם*, *you who cleave unto your G-d, you are all alive today*.

“The Talmud quotes ben Sira, ‘Do not agonize about tomorrow’s problems, because you have no way of

predicting tomorrow' (Sanhedrin 100b). The Chasam Sofer says that this is the way one can vanquish the yetzer harah. If a person thinks that he must resist the yetzer harah's temptations throughout his entire lifetime, he might consider it impossible and may give up without trying. Therefore, the Chasam Sofer says, think about resisting the yetzer harah only today. That is certainly within everyone's abilities.

"This is what Moshe told the Israelites. 'You can cleave to G-d and observe all His mitzvos if you think only about living הַיּוֹם, *this day*. Don't take on tomorrow's challenges today.'

"... It is standard operating procedure for people to make 'New Year resolutions,' and it is common knowledge that they invariably fail. The reason is that they say to themselves, 'I will not smoke this entire year!' or 'I will not eat excessively this entire year.' This is far too great an undertaking and one fails because one cannot conceive of ever being able to succeed. The correct thing to do, as the Chasam Sofer teaches, is to tackle only today's problems and challenges today. Breaking a resolution down to bite-size pieces makes it feasible to keep over the long term" (Twerski on Chumash, p.367-368).

הַיּוֹם אַלְלֵקְיָכֶם הַיּוֹם כֻּלְּכֶם, הַיּוֹם אַלְלֵקְיָכֶם, הַיּוֹם אַלְלֵקְיָכֶם, *you who cleave unto your G-d, you are all alive today*.

Sometimes, with the challenges and life situations we all face, avodas Hashem may seem daunting. We may want to change, we desire to improve ourselves and come closer to Hashem, but when we think of the work that needs to be done, it may be so overwhelming, we might just want to give up before we even try! Hence, Moshe Rabbeinu, in his profound, eternal and prophetic wisdom, gives us the secret to success in all realms of life: Just focus on today. Today, surely, you can be successful in your quest for

Declaration of Dependence

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Where would the desert generation be without the heroic prayers of Moshe? Twice the young nation rebelled, first betraying their vows at Sinai, and, subsequently, scorning an invitation to enter the promised land. Twice, Moshe's prayers rescued the Jewish people from Divine wrath and possible annihilation. At one point Moshe even fasted 40 days, desperately battling for the survival of his beloved rebels. Though our Avot modelled the original concept of tefilla, Moshe provided

greatness. We will worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.

R' Binaymin Finkel, son of the Mirrer Mashgiach Rav Aryeh Finkel zt'l, and popularly referred to as Reb Binyamin HaTzaddik, pointed out that the yetzer harah is really just a two trick pony. When he sees that someone has decided to improve himself, he says: "What are you making yourself crazy about? You are still young, and you have your whole life still ahead of you! No need to get caught up with these things at your age. Of course, they are important and of course you must learn more and improve your character traits, but when you are older. Now, you still have plenty of time left for these things!"

Then one day, it suddenly changes. You decide to embark on some course of improvement, and sure enough, right on cue, the yetzer harah shows up. This time, however, the message is different. "Now you decide to work on improving your character traits!? Now you decide to complete a tractate of Gemara!? Now!? At your age! Don't be foolish; it is too late! You are too old to accomplish something like that!"

That is his entire ploy. At first, he tells you that you are young and you still have plenty of time to accomplish. No need to rush things, all in due time. Then, one day, it just changes. You are too old! It is too late to change! Nobody knows exactly when this happens, the switch from 'You are still young, you have plenty of time,' to 'You are too old already, it is too late to begin working on such projects!' (Portraits of Prayer, p.299).

As we look ahead to Chodesh Elul, the final month of the year, and a time of cheshbon ha'nefesh (introspection) and teshuva, repentance, let us remember that the Torah is our guidebook for life. If we but focus on overcoming the battles of today, then we will reach success today, and every day going forward.

much of its architecture as well as some of its basic content. Moshe was our supreme Torah teacher and our greatest prophet. Additionally, he demonstrated, that tefilla can bend the will of G-d.

After a lifetime of praying for others, Moshe now prays for himself and for passage into a homeland from which he was barred. Facing a crushing punishment, he furiously prays to repeal the decree so he can voyage into the land of his dreams. According to the midrash he prays 500

different prayers, but, sadly, never received the response he coveted. Throughout his many years of prayer, Moshe had assembled a vast “arsenal” of different forms of tefilla. Prayer, as an emotional encounter between Man and G-d, spans a broad spectrum of voices and “tones”. Our Chazal delineate seven basic brands of tefilla, but, clearly, there are many more variants and countless “derivatives” of these basic seven.

From this expansive menu of tefilla choices, Moshe selects an interesting option: he begins with the word “V’etchanan”- a word which lends the parsha its title. This term “V’etchanan” possesses dual meaning. Firstly, it refers to a “petition” or an “appeal”- in this instance Moshe’s plea to enter Israel. Yet, the word also refers to a request which is “undeserved”. The term V’etchanan is analogous to the word ‘chanan’ or even ‘chinam’, each of which evokes the concept of something ‘free’ rather than merited. Often, we pray for an outcome we believe we deserve. We invoke our own virtues, and we also summon the achievements of earlier generations- zechut avot. Still other times, we ask G-d to freely grant us unmerited mercy. We stare at our own frailty, and, out of our weakness, we call to G-d for mercy. We would have expected Moshe to lodge his request based on his past accomplishments. Given his years of endless self-sacrifice, this modest request seems fully warranted. Yet Moshe requests a “free pass” into Israel because, in his own mind, he doesn’t deserve this grant. By praying with the word V’etchanan, he requests an undeserved “favor” from G-d.

This decision spotlights just how humble Moshe was. He had scaled the heavens and split the sea, but this didn’t inflate his ego, nor did it yield any sense of entitlement or claim to G-d. Standing at the door of the land of Israel he pleaded as a beggar would. When we are content, and our needs are filled, it is generally easier to feel “humble”. However, desperation and urgency plays tricks with our minds, “convincing” us that we deserve our wants and desires. Sometimes, we justify our deepest desires by persuading ourselves that we deserve them. Moshe is humble even under duress, meekly requesting a favor he doesn’t believe is his “right”. His plea of “V’etchanan” spotlights his uncanny humility.

More importantly, Moshe’s tefilla underscores the power of receiving favors. Receiving something we deserve is transactional and doesn’t further any interpersonal bonds. By contrast, the provision of undeserved favors forges relationships. The impact of a favor is felt both by the

provider and by the recipient. Obviously, the recipient of a favor is grateful and appreciative for his underserved gift. Equally important though, providing help and assistance, bonds us more deeply to the recipient of our kindness. It is human nature to become emotionally invested in the subjects of our compassion and of our altruism. It is true in our interpersonal relationships, just as it is true in our relationship with G-d. Moshe prefers a Divine gift, recognizing that it will deepen his relationship with G-d. Favors and underserved kindness are the building blocks of relationships and of friendship.

We all cycle through two very different phases of human experience: independence and dependence. G-d fashioned us free and capable, empowering us with great potential and tasking us with grand mission. Human proficiency capitalizes upon those gifts while incompetence and ineptitude squanders them.

Yet, G-d also desired that Man live a life of dependence. By providing a spouse, G-d introduced Man to the concept of “relationships” and to the experience of dependency. G-d desires that we acknowledge our inherent limits and resolve them by leaning on others for that which he can’t achieve independently. Our success in life rests on our ability to carefully calibrate between these two frequencies of the human condition. Hillel’s famous statement distills these two phases of human experience: “If I am not independently competent what am I; if I stand alone I am futile!”. We are meant to be self-sufficient, and, other times, we are meant to be dependent upon the favors and kindness of others.

Numerous factors in modern society motivate human independence while devaluing human dependence. Democracy sanctifies human independence and the value of each citizen, prioritizing the individual over the state and the collective. Our culture celebrates individual effort and respects rugged individualists who can “go it alone” and provide for themselves and for their own needs. Politics and culture have each promoted independence at the cost of dependence. The word “independent” is venerated, while the word “dependent” is sometimes seen as a pejorative.

Technology has expedited work which, in previous generations required collaboration and teamwork. Life has become easier and household appliances have eliminated our dependence upon the teamwork of a family. Social media has replaced actual communities with virtual ones, and we are no longer dependent upon relationships for our

social interaction. In a society of political, economic and cultural independence we are quickly forgetting how to be “dependent”.

Dependence also carries personal costs. We take great pride at our own independence and the dignity of self-sufficiency. Embracing ‘dependence’ shines a light on our personal limits and weaknesses. Dependence demands vulnerability which is frightening. We are more comfortable when posing as strong and self-sufficient. In addition to the emotional cost of dependence there is also a behavioral cost. When we enter relationships of dependence, we are forced to compromise our own needs while making room for others. Independence allows us

to control our personal space and preserve our private interests. Independence is cost-free- at least to our personal lifestyles.

Ironically, it is much easier- especially in today’s democratic and technologically advanced society- to live independently. However, the temptation of “independence” hampers deep relationships. The strongest relationships, such as marriage and friendship are built upon mutual dependency. Without leaning into dependence sometimes our relationships stall or remain shallow. Moshe’s begging reminds us that sometimes we have to learn how to accept favors.

Loving the Land of Israel

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week’s Torah portion, parashat Va’etchanan, is an extremely rich parasha.

The parasha opens with Moses’ plea to G-d to allow him to enter the land of Israel. Unfortunately, his plea is rejected. This is followed by a warning regarding the idolatrous religious practices of the ancients who inhabit Canaan. The parasha most notably contains a repetition of the Aseret Hadibrot, the decalogue or the Ten Commandments, and includes the famous Shema prayer as well. The parasha concludes with a description of what awaits the Jewish people when they enter the land of Israel and a warning not to be tempted by the decadent practices of the native inhabitants.

Parashat Va’etchanan, is always read on the Shabbat that follows the fast of Tisha b’Av, the fast that commemorates the destruction of the ancient Temples in Jerusalem. Because of that, the uplifting Haftarah from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah is read. This chapter begins with the words, נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי, “Comfort thee, comfort thee, My people,” says G-d, and therefore, the Shabbat that follows Tisha b’Av is known as Shabbat Nah’chah’mu, the Sabbath of comfort.

While the fast of Tisha b’Av is now behind us, and we have thankfully entered the period of Shev’ah d’N’chem’tah, the seven weeks in which we read Isaiah’s messages of comfort, allow me to share with you a striking insight regarding the fast of Tisha b’Av that I found in the commentary on the ArtScroll Kinot.

For those who are unfamiliar, Kinot are a collection

of liturgical poems written mostly during the Middle Ages, bewailing the destruction of the Temples and the mourning over the hardships endured by our people throughout the ages. These poems are read after the Book of Eichah (Lamentations) is chanted on the night of Tisha b’Av. A larger selection of Kinot is recited on the morning of Tisha b’Av, following the Shacharit, morning services.

After reading two dozen Kinot on Tisha b’Av morning lamenting the destruction of the Temple, a kinah, known as *מי יתן ראשי מימים*, “*Would that my head were water,*” is read. It is the first kinah recited on Tisha b’Av that is not related to the destruction of the Temples. In fact, it is a poem that recalls the calamity that befell the Jewish communities of the Rhineland Germany–Worms, Speyer and Mainz (Mayence) in the year 1096, during the First Crusade. Although this destruction occurred over 1,000 years after the sacking of the Second Temple, this kinah is included in the Tisha b’Av ritual to indicate that Tisha b’Av is the universal day of mourning and that all Jewish tragedies can be traced back to the destruction of our Temple and the sin of the scouts, as recorded in the Bible.

The ArtScroll commentary (The Complete Tishah B’Av Service), strikingly points out the universality of Tisha b’Av as the national day of mourning:

When the Jewish people became aware of the awesome devastation that befell our nation at the hands of the murderous Nazis in World War II, many sought to establish a new day of national mourning to commemorate Churban Europa. The contemporary Torah leaders were consulted.

Among the responses was that of the Brisker Rav, R' Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, who said that the reply to this question lies in the kinnah before us. Why didn't the great Rabbis and Sages of that generation—among them the greatest of the Rishonim, including Rashi to II Chronicles 35:25,—establish a new day of national mourning to commemorate that new tragedy? The author of this kinnah addresses this question and offers this insight:

Please take to your hearts to compose a bitter eulogy, / because their massacre is deservant of mourning and rolling in dust / as was the burning of the House of our God. Its Hall and Its Palace. / However, we cannot add a (new) day (of mourning) over ruin and conflagration, / nor may we mourn any earlier—only later. / Instead, today (on Tishah B'Av), I will arouse my sorrowful wailing, / and I will eulogize and wail and weep with a bitter soul, / and my groans are heavy from morning until evening.

Thus, the essential purpose of this kinnah is to drive home this lesson: There are really no new tragedies befalling Israel. All of our woes stem from one tragic source—the Destruction of the Temple on Tishah B'Av. To establish a new day of mourning would detract from the significance of Tishah B'Av and obscure its lesson and message. (See Rashi to II Chronicles 35:25.)

This kinnah also answers another major question. Why does the exile continue? Why does G-d visit fresh calamities upon His people? Where have we gone astray?

One of the main reasons for the continuation of our exile is because Jews are often quite content and comfortable in their adopted, alien homelands and have all but lost their desire to return to the poverty and hardships of Eretz Yisrael. Slowly the Jew ceases to identify with his true home, the Holy Land, and begins to feel intense pride in his citizenship in his new country.

The destruction of the Jewish community of Worms in the German Rhineland was the work of the crusaders. How ironic! The crusaders were willing to leave everything behind—homes, families, occupations—in order to conquer the Holy Land they called Palestine, while the Jews themselves were filled with no such zeal to regain their own homeland! In heaven, this irony did not go unnoticed, but aroused a terrible denunciation against the Jewish people, and especially against the Jews of Worms and her neighboring communities.

The classic work on Jewish history, Seder HaDorot, by R' Yechiel Halperin, records the following observation in his entry for the year 5380 (1620):

The author of the commentary Sefer Meirat Eynayim (SMA) on the Shulchan Aruch explained why the Jewish community of Worms suffered far more persecution, pogroms and evil decrees than other congregations. That kehillah was founded by Jewish exiles who made their way to Germany following the Destruction of the First Temple. After seventy years of exile, many Jews returned from Babylon to Eretz Yisrael and Jerusalem, but none returned from Worms. The community in Jerusalem wrote to the kehillah in Worms and urged them to join their new settlement in Jerusalem... but the complacent Jews of Worms dismissed this invitation out of hand. Instead, they responded, 'You stay where you are in the great Jerusalem, and we will continue to stay where we are in our little Jerusalem!' This arrogant response was due to the prosperity and prestige the Jews of Worms enjoyed in the eyes of the local gentiles and their princes.

The success of Worms was its undoing! The prosperity of the Jew in exile is nothing more than a Divine test to see whether it will cause the Jew to forget his homeland and his heritage. Worms and the Rhineland failed and suffered bitterly. In our own times, the vast majority of the German kehillah failed, because, as Meshech Chochmah (commentary on the Pentateuch by R. Meir Simcha HaKohen of Dvinsk, 1843-1926, author of the classic work Ohr Sameach) (Bechukotai) observes, 'They began to call Berlin, Jerusalem!' (The ArtScroll Kinot pp 272-273)

A similar challenge faces the Jewish people today. Will we rise to the occasion and acknowledge the special gift of G-d—that we today have witnessed the return of the land of Israel to Jewish hands, or will we ignore this special gift, and continue to compose elegies for the losses that we have sustained?

May we respond with passion and with alacrity, and merit to behold the redemption of our people in the very near future.

Mitzvot from the Heart

Rabbi Judah Kerbel

One of my fifth-grade students innocently asked me this past year what happens to you if you do not say Shema on time, as we were learning the proper time for saying Shema every day. My instinct was to beat around the bush a little – I perhaps mentioned that positive commandments do not really come with punishments, but even if that were not true, I do not necessarily want to teach my students that Judaism is about avoiding punishment, as I will elaborate on. But she kept pressing me – she was expecting me to say that there must be some sort of consequence! So, I gave the following personal example: I generally get flowers for my wife every *erev Shabbos* (although that has become more difficult during COVID-19; this interaction took place earlier in the year). Why do I do it? Because it makes her genuinely happy every time that I appear with them. What happens if I do not? There is no concept of punishment in marriage, but she would be disappointed. So too, I said, Hashem expects us to perform mitzvot. What happens if we do not? Perhaps Hashem is disappointed in us, but we do mitzvot out of our love for Hashem.

It is in Parashat Vaetchanan that we encounter the source for the mitzvah to say Shema, and included in the recitation of Shema is the verse *ואהבת את ה' אלקיך*, you should love Hashem your Lord (Devarim 6:5). Shortly after Shema, we encounter the verse *את ה' אלקיך תירא* – you should fear Hashem your Lord (6:13). These two directives may seemingly be contradictory and difficult to balance, but our tradition is clear about which is the higher ideal: love. Rashi explains the directive of *ואהבת* as “fulfill Hashem’s words out of love.” Seforno further adds: “it should make you happy to do the things that are good in Hashem’s eyes, when you come to understand that there is no purpose more honorable than that.” Finally, Rambam writes at the end of *Hilkhot Teshuva* that while there is a mitzvah to fear Hashem, serving Him in that manner is not the type of sophisticated approach to which to aspire. Instead, the greatest service of Hashem comes from a place of love, citing *ואהבת את ה' אלקיך* as a proof-text. He further elaborates to explain what love of Hashem is – it is such that you are always thinking about Hashem, in everything you do, that your soul is completely intertwined in this love to the point where you are lovesick (see *Shir Ha-*

Shirim 2:5)! While the Torah may establish punishments for transgressing certain mitzvot and we could discuss what happens to someone who does not fulfill positive commandments, Moshe Rabbeinu is teaching us that most desirable is to fulfill mitzvot when it comes from a place of love.

An interesting area where there may be important implications from here is the area of *chumra*, taking on stringencies. There may be two types of *chumrot*: Some are communal or built into the halachic system to the point that they are normative and generally required, even though they may go beyond what is required by the Torah itself or even the Talmud. Rav Hershel Schachter (Rav Schachter on the Parasha, p. 236) writes that observing mitzvot *derbbanan* demonstrates our communal love of Hashem because we commit to practices not that Hashem directly commanded, but that we take on in order to demonstrate our love. But others are more personal in nature and it is up to the individual to take them on as personal practice. There is a balance to strike: on the one hand, *chumra* can serve as an expression of our love for Hashem. We are so engaged and inspired in our performance of mitzvot that we are willing to go the extra mile. On the other hand, *chumra* can feel stifling, burdensome, interfering with our ability to live life. When it comes to the *chumrot* that are either “built in” to the system, or perhaps a mitzvah itself, we do not have the option of whether to do it or not – serving Hashem means we have to do our job, and this is admittedly true whether or not one wants to do so. But other *chumrot*, particularly those that are personal in nature, have to depend on what the individual can handle. If incorporating a *chumra* leads to a leniency in loving Hashem, is it worthwhile? Is it perhaps better to do what is required of us and do that with enthusiasm and excitement, if taking on more creates greater resentment? On the other hand, if a particular *chumra* is appropriate for a particular individual and one does so to earnestly reach higher in serving Hashem, perhaps that is a beautiful thing.¹

¹ The subject of *chumra* requires greater elaboration, and personal decisions perhaps should be made in consultation with a halachic authority; my purpose in raising them is just to raise a possible consideration in how one chooses to take on *chumrot*.

We always read Parashat Vaetchanan and encounter the mitzvah to love Hashem shortly after the observance of Tisha B'av. After Tisha B'av, it may be hard to swallow the idea of "love." We spent the day reminding ourselves of the times in history during which we have been estranged from Hashem. However, even Tisha B'av paradoxically has to do with our love or lack thereof of Hashem. In the tochecha found in Parashat Ki Tavo, we are told that the curses come תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלקיך בשמחה ובטוב לבב ומרוב כל – as a result of your not worshipping Hashem with joy and goodness of heart when everything was abundant. Is it not a bit paradoxical that we should be punished for not having served Hashem out of love? Perhaps, though, the curses are not a punishment as much as they are a natural consequence. What kind of relationship is it when there is no joy and no love? Such a relationship can be temporarily sustained, but it is inevitable that it will fall apart. Ramban says that the curses in Devarim pertain to the destruction

of the second Beit Ha-Mikdash.

What we may take away from this is that in order to have, to restore our relationship with Hashem, it will only come when there is love and joy in our observance of mitzvot. We need not worry so much about fear and punishment – but if we can bring ourselves to an attitude of אהבת השם, love of God, our relationship will be naturally restored and redemption may come our way. Precisely as we emerge from Tisha B'av, we are reminded to not serve Hashem out of despair but because doing mitzvot genuinely inspires love within us.

Perhaps we can reflect over Shabbat: what is a mitzvah that I connect to? How can I enhance the actual performance of that mitzvah or the feeling while performing it in a manner to show my love for that mitzvah and for Hashem? What is one action that I can take on that I do not already within that mitzvah that can help me reach that goal?

Why A Second Edition?

Rabbi Ari Zucker

Embazoned above the Aron Kodesh, the Aseret Hadibrot embody the principles of our faith. And that special status makes their repetition so confounding. Why repeat them at all, and once repeating, why change some of the terminology!?

Rabbi Meir Shpeigelman of Yeshivat Har Etzion pinpoints the pivotal moment that necessitated a change in our dibrot: the Golden Calf. At its core, the Calf saw Am Yisrael attempting to play an active role in their relationship with the Divine. As they left Egypt they were slaves, but their sin stemmed from a desire to be treated as equals. As such, the "contract" of the dibrot changed to reflect a new status in the God-Israel relationship.

The most well-known change is also the one that highlights this idea perfectly. In the first set, the fourth dibur commands us, "Zachor," remember Shabbat, but "Shamor," guard the Shabbat, in the second set. Many have

asked: what is the difference, and why the change?

In the first set, Shabbat happened on its own. The commandment of Zachor was merely to recognize and "remember" the Shabbat. But if the Jewish people desire an equal partnership with God (to the extent that it's possible), then Shabbat cannot emanate solely from the Divine. Instead, the Jewish people had to create a Shabbat. How does one "create" Shabbat?

Although it may seem counterintuitive, we create Shabbat by limiting our activities; by "guarding" the Shabbat. Shabbat "rest" is not about passively subsisting for 24 hours! The don'ts of Shabbat form our role in creating the Shabbat; as the pasuk continues, "La'asot et hashabbat" (to make Shabbat), our guarding creates our Shabbat. Shabbat is not about saying "no" to our phones, computers, cars and kitchens. It's about creating space in our lives to say "yes" to a partnership with Hashem.