



# The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

## Va'etchanan 5783

### Words on Fire

Dr. Erica Brown

**T**ake utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously,” Moses advised in this week’s Torah reading Ve’ethanan, “so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children’s children” (Deut. 4:11-12). The foundational experiences of becoming a nation may fade over time so Moses asks that his people – our people – bear witness to what they have gone through and share it with the power of story.

One of those indelible experiences was the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Moses has specific details burnished in his mind about that nascent time in Israelite history: “You came forward and stood at the foot of the mountain. The mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies, dark with densest clouds. God spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice” (Deut. 4:11-12). Moses’ description is rich and sensory, as if to say, these are “the things you saw with your own eyes.” Never forget them.

The Jerusalem Talmud offers an incredible commentary on how this specific scene and verse was passed from father to son. Elisha, the Talmud’s famous heretic, was extolling his father Abuya with the story about the day of Elisha’s brit, his entrance into the covenant. Abuya was a wealthy man who invited all the important people of Jerusalem to this event. They were in one room feasting, dancing and clapping. In the next room, the sages Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua were studying Torah.

The rabbis said to each other, “While they are occupied in theirs let us be occupied with ours.” They studied an array of subjects with such intensity that, “fire descended from Heaven and surrounded them.” Abuya ran next door and chastised the pair: “Why do you come to burn down

my house?” The sages were unapologetic. They exclaimed, “The words were joyful as at their giving on Sinai.” Since the words of Torah were given with fire, they told Abuya that they received them with fire. They then cite our sedra’s verse: “The mountain was ablaze with flames.” Abuya was so impressed with the power of Torah that he said he would dedicate his new son to the Torah.

The message of the story is clear. Words given in fire are received in fire. The passion of study and learning attracts, magnetizes, and burns brightly.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *Crisis and Covenant*, teaches the power of the Torah’s words is singular to our faith: “For Judaism God is to be found not in a person or a place but in words, the words of the Mosaic books, Torah in its narrow sense. Neither Moses, the greatest of the prophets, nor Sinai, the place of revelation, have intrinsic sanctity. They were the vehicles of revelation, not its embodiment. That description belongs to Torah alone.”

The metaphor of a burning mountain as a symbol of intellectual charisma reminds us that if the words we use are on fire, they will be received with fire. When we are passionate about a cause or an idea, we can generate passion in others. When we are unmoved by our own words, so too will those hearing them be unmoved. Leaders understand this. Followers want charisma in their leaders. They want to feel inspired, stimulated, and motivated.

In “What is Charismatic Leadership?,” (May 17, 2022), Hannah L. Miller describes charismatic leaders as “charming, caring, motivational, supportive, infectious, and warm.” She believes they have unusually good emotional intelligence, confidence, and potent energy. Their charm and likeability resonate with others and help drive results. This is especially important, Miller contends, in companies with a strong social cause: “the leader drives people to stay

positive, upbeat, and keep fighting the good fight.”

There are dangers, though. Fire burns. Jim Collins in *Good to Great* discusses the liability of charisma. The passion of a leader for an idea or a strategy can blind him or her to other opinions. Egos and tempers can be high when followers do not achieve the desired results. Followers may not buy into the prevailing zeitgeist with the same level of commitment. This can lead to burnout. Sometimes passion can falsely compete with content or real work. Words on fire become meaningless if they are not backed up with outcomes. In their article “Falling over Ourselves to Follow the Leader” (*Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 14:1, 2007), Igor Kotlyar and Len Karakowsky write, “The prevailing belief is that charismatic leaders

## The Wasteland

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

We have mentioned in the past (see Netvort to parshas Vaeschanan, 5762, available at [Torahheights.com](http://Torahheights.com)) that Rabbi Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik pointed out that the Rambam, in his Laws of Prayer, writes that the widespread custom is to read Va’eschanan 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 comfort, and we need to emphasize nechama 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.

One aspect of consolation that we find in the parsha occurs when the Torah (Devorim 4:25-40) tells us that God will send us into exile if we persist in our sins, but that within that exile we can return to God if we seek him with all our heart. This, then, is a parsha of repentance. Rabbi Soloveitchik pointed out that it was for this reason that this part of the parsha was chosen to be read on Tisha B’Av

always bring out the best in their followers and help teams perform beyond expectations.” This is not always true. “What we discovered, in contrast, is that a less flamboyant, no-frills leader can be more successful at engaging executive teams in brainstorming while keeping emotions and ego in check.”

In our sedra, Moses challenged the Israelites to hold fast to the visual image of a burning mountain so that the words of Torah would continue to simmer within them. He was also telling them how to transmit God’s law to the next generation. Words given in fire are received in fire. So was it then. So is it now.

**What words, advice, or events are burnished in fire within you that you have passed down?**

itself. One method of attaining repentance, is spelled out, I believe, in the section immediately following the section that is read on Tisha B’Av. The Torah (Devorim, 4:41-43) goes on to relate that Moshe set aside three cities of refuge, each designated as a kind of sanctuary for the inadvertent murderer, to save him from the hands of the blood avenger. The rabbis point out that Moshe set these cities aside in his lifetime even though they would not become operative until the other three, that were on the other side of the Yarden, would be set aside, something that would not happen until after Moshe’s death. Moshe, out of his love for the mitzvos, did as much as he could in his lifetime, setting an example for the nation, to pursue mitzvos.

Rabbi Naphtoli Tzvi Yehudah Berlin pointed out that Moshe’s actions demonstrated another aspect of his approach to mitzvos given in his commentary Ha’amek Davar, one that is not spelled out by the rabbis. By designating these cities, Moshe was teaching us that we need to study new cases in Jewish law before they actually arise, so that we will be prepared for them when they do. This approach, writes the Netziv, decreases the possibility of mistakes that might obtain if we waited until actual new circumstances arose to learn how to apply the halacha in them. The emphasis on the study of Torah pointed out by the Netziv actually can serve as a spur to repentance on the heels of Tisha B’Av, based on a passage in the Talmud (Nedorim 81a) which cites the verses in Yirmiyahu (9:11-12) : Who is the wise man who will understand this? ... For

what reason did the land perish and become parched like the desert without a passerby? God said ‘ Because of their forsaking My Torah that I put before them ...’ “. The rabbis there explain this to mean that the people who studied Torah did not recite the blessings over it before learning it. Rabbi Nissim of Gerona, in his commentary there, cites, with approval, the explanation of Rabbeinu Yona, who says that if it was merely because of a failure to learn Torah that the land had been destroyed, then the wise men should have understood that. Rather, it was because they did not recite the blessings over the Torah, which, on a deeper level, means that they did not place enough importance on their torah learning, and learned it for selfish reasons (‘shelo lishma’), and that this is something which only God, who can see into people’s hearts, could know. Based on the explanation of the Netziv, we can add that studying Torah in the way which Moshe demonstrated to the Jewish people, anticipating possibilities of cases in Jewish law arising before they actually did, is certainly a form of learning Torah that is motivated by the love of God. In this sense, it serves as an example of the kind of learning that must be engaged in to preclude the divine reaction referred to by Yirmiyahu, over which we mourn of Tisha B’Av.

Interestingly, the Talmud in Yoma (9b), in discussing the reasons for the destruction of the two Temples, does not cite the verse in Yirmiyahu which is discussed in Nedorim, but gives completely different reasons. Rav Zechariah Gelley, shlita, spiritual leader of the Breuer’s community in Washington Heights, pointed out that there is really no contradiction, because the gemara in Nedorim is not discussing why the Temples were destroyed, but why the land was desolate. As Rav Gelley interpreted it, the gemara is discussing a stage after the exile, such as the times in which we now live, when God, in His mercy, has given us back portions of Eretz Yisroel, but then to take parts of it back. Why does this happen? Because the reason we have received Eretz Yisroel again is to learn God’s torah

and perform His mitzvos there. When we fail in that task, we slowly begin to lose the parts of Eretz Yisroel which we have received.

Actually, Rav Ya’akov Emden, in an introduction to his commentary to the siddur (Sulam Beis- El, chapter 4) already pointed out the distinction between the gemara in Nedorim and the gemara in Yoma, but explained it differently from Rav Gelley. He wrote that the gemara in Nedorim is not asking why the Temple was destroyed, but why, after the destruction of the Temple, the land itself became desolate. Why should the land suffer because of the sins of the people? The answer is that the people did not make the blessings over the Torah before learning it. Rav Zevi Yehudah Kook, zt”l, explained this to mean that they did not emphasize the words in the first of the blessings of the Torah, thanking God ‘ Who has chosen us from among the nations and given us His Torah,’ before engaging in Torah study. The message here is that the Torah is the soul of the Jewish people, which keeps it alive, and those people who did learn Torah did not do so for the interest of the Jewish people at large, but for their own selfish purposes.

Both the explanation of Rav Gelley and that of Rav Ya’akov Emden, as expanded upon by Rav Zevi Yehudah Kook, take on added meaning when seen in the light of the Netziv’s interpretation of Moshe’s purpose in setting aside the cities of exile before they could actually serve as places of refuge for those who killed inadvertently. By demonstrating to them that they needed to study the Torah laws involved with these cities before they actually could serve their function, he was both showing them that our hold on Eretz Yisroel is a function of our application of Torah law to it, and that, in learning those Torah laws that apply to Eretz Yisroel, we must have in mind the welfare of all factions of the nation, even those who have been involved in acts of murder, albeit inadvertently. May we all experience the consolation of Tziyon and Yerusholayim, speedily in our days.

## Prayer from the Heart

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

**M**oshe tells Bnei Yisrael at the beginning of the parsha about his prayers to enter Eretz Yisrael. “*Va’eschanan el Hashem ba’eis hahi leimor, Hashem Elokim ata hachilosa l’haros es avdecha. I prayed to God at that time to let me cross into the Land of Israel.*”

However, Hashem said no: “*Al tosef daber eilay od badavar hazeh. Don’t speak to Me anymore about this matter.*”

Shem Mishmuel asks two small questions that raise important ideas. The word va’eschanan is in the hispa’el reflexive form. Moshe could have said *v’chananti*, in the

simple binyan kal form, meaning to beg or pray. Why does he use this unusual grammar in describing his prayer?

The second question refers to the context that Moshe establishes in retelling the story of his prayers. The pasuk says, “I prayed to God at that time.” Why is the timing of Moshe’s prayer important? Rashi explains that Moshe referred to a specific time of triumph. “After I conquered the land of Sichon and Og, I thought, maybe the neder is broken. Since I partially entered into Eretz Yisrael, perhaps Hashem has forgiven my sin and will allow me into Eretz Yisrael proper. I thought my punishment had been waived.” Why did Moshe Rabbeinu mention this particular point to the Jewish people? Why is it important for them to know Moshe made his request after the conquest of Sichon and Og?

### Closing the Gates

In order to answer these questions, Shem Mishmuel cites an interesting Midrash. The students asked Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel based on the pasuk in Tehillim 69:14, “*V’ani t’filasi lecha Hashem eis ratzon*. I pray to You, God, at the time of Your favor.” This verse implies that there is a special time of God’s favor during which it is good to pray. The students asked Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel what this means. He explained that, sometimes, the gates of heaven are open to prayer. This is called *eis ratzon*, a time of divine graciousness. Sometimes, though, the gates of heaven are closed to tefila.

Elsewhere we are told that the gates of teshuva are always open (Devarim Rabba 2:12). The rabbis here based their opinion on the verse in Devarim 4:7, “*K’Hashem Elokeinu b’chol kareinu eilav*. Who is like Hashem, our God, Who listens to us at all times whenever we call to Him?”

These two verses seem to contradict each other. One says that there are auspicious times to pray, *eis ratzon*, and the other says *b’chol kareinu eilav*, that Hashem listens attentively to our prayers at all times.

Shem Mishmuel explains how each of these opinions is correct. Everyone agrees that the gates of teshuva are always open because the opening and closing of the heavenly gates reflects the situation in this world. We live in a world of time. In this world, there are specific times when opportunities appear and become available. There are good times and bad times; times change.

However, this is only true for things that exist in this world. Things that are beyond this world don’t share its limitation of time. Teshuva, says the Gemara, was created even before Hashem created the world. Since teshuva—

repentance—existed before the world was created, it is not limited by time and place. Any person can do teshuva anytime and in any place, and come back to Hashem.

However, tefila did not exist before the creation of the world. Only after God created the world and human beings did He create the concept of tefila. Prayer is part of this world. As all of this creation depends on time, prayer therefore has certain times at which it is more appropriate or fitting. There are times when God listens to prayers, and there are times when He doesn’t. We want to find Hashem in times when He will listen to prayers.

### Keeping the Gates Open

Shem Mishmuel suggests a second approach to the two views of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel and the rabanan concerning the gates of prayer closing. Whenever Shem Mishmuel discusses a *machlokes* in Midrashim, he likes to say that both are valid; you just have to understand the different contexts in which each one makes sense. Thus, it is possible that the gates of heaven are sometimes closed and simultaneously never closed. It depends on the kind of tefila that a person prays.

The Avnei Nezer gave over a famous teaching based on Rashi’s comments on Bereishis, 48:22. In the pasuk there, Yaakov describes his conquest of the city of Shechem, saying that he took the city “*b’charbi u’v’kashti*, with my sword and my bow.” Rashi interprets these two as “*b’chochmasi u’vi’tfilasi*,” meaning that Yaakov conquered Shechem with wisdom and prayer. Yaakov was not as powerful as the people of Shechem. Torah and tefila are the real Jewish weapons.

We see here that prayer is compared to a bow and arrow. The more you bend a bow, the farther the arrow will fly. If you pull the bow back all the way, the arrow will fly very far.

The power of the prayer is determined by how deep it comes from within the heart. When a person prays, he can use only part of his heart, or he can use more of it. The harder the heart is bent and pulled, the stronger the prayer that will shoot from it.

The heart feels pain and frustration. This is why people turn to pray. They need Hashem to help them. If they only partially feel that need and suffering, the power of their prayer is limited.

When a person holds in his breath, at some point he has to open his mouth and breathe out, so much so that the air feels like it explodes from him. Sometimes, a person holds such deep pain in his heart from a terrible situation;



eventually, he bursts out in prayer to Hashem from the bottom of his heart, which is filled with so much angst and anxiety. When he unleashes such a prayer from the depth of his agony, that prayer pierces any gate. Every gate in heaven must open for that kind of prayer.

When the rabanan said no gates are ever closed to prayer, they were talking about a fully extended bow of prayer, from the bottom of a person's heart. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, who said that prayers sometimes hit closed gates, was referring to prayers that don't come from the bottom of the heart. Sometimes, the gates open for these regular prayers, and sometimes they remain closed.

### The Deepest Prayer

Moshe Rabbeinu said, "I davened, *va'eschanan*." Rashi (Devarim 3:23) in this parsha quotes the Midrash that says there are ten different words for prayer. *Va'eschanan*, from the root word *techina*, is the last of the ten words for prayer. According to the Ari Hakadosh, the human heart has ten levels. During the aseres yemei teshuva, we say Shir Haamaalos Mima'amakim from the ten steps and depths of the human heart. We try to fix those ten steps of the heart during the days from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur.

The deepest prayer is *techina*. It is the tenth level, the Yom Kippur level, when one's heart bursts from pain.

Moshe prayed from the deepest depths of his heart. He couldn't contain himself. He deeply wished to go into Eretz Yisrael, but he wasn't allowed to. The rest of Bnei Yisrael, however, were going to go in. He couldn't contain the depths of agony that he felt being excluded from this incredible, ultimate experience of the redemption, of coming to Eretz Yisrael together with the Jewish people. Unfortunately, he would die and stay alone on the other side of the Jordan River. At this time, Moshe burst forth with prayer, out of a tremendous depth of longing and disappointment.

This helps us understand why the word *va'eschanan* is in the *hispa'el* reflexive-intensive form. Moshe didn't just sit down and logically compose a thoughtful prayer. He prayed with his entire being. It was an automatic response to reach out to Hashem to save him from an impossible situation. This was the level of Moshe's heartfelt prayer.

### Timely Prayer

Moshe emphasized the time when he prayed: *ba'eis hahi*, after Bnei Yisrael had conquered Sichon and Og. It was an *eis ratzon*, at which time even a regular prayer (not a completely heartfelt one) would be accepted; at times like

this, Hashem will give out of His beneficence, not due to any particular merit. Hashem had just enabled Bnei Yisrael to conquer a part of Eretz Yisrael for the first time, so Moshe perceived that it was a special time of God's blessings.

Shem Mishmuel explains that, often, Hashem won't give blessings of *eis ratzon* when *resha'im* are involved. He doesn't want them to benefit from His special generosity. He only makes an *eis ratzon* when there are no wicked people. Sichon and Og had just been destroyed and it was therefore a time of great *ratzon*, since these evil kings had been defeated.

### Secrets to Successful Prayer

Now we understand that two elements stood in Moshe's favor. First, he prayed from the depth of his heart. Secondly, he prayed at an *eis ratzon*. Yet Hashem still rejected Moshe's prayer.

What was Moshe trying to teach the people? He knew that the Jewish people were very upset that he was going to die. They would have to fend for themselves in conquering the land of Canaan and its seven powerful nations. Yehoshua was ready to serve as their next leader, but he was relatively young. They knew Moshe's greatness. He took them out of Mitzrayim, and he received the Torah at Har Sinai, and did so many other miracles.

They weren't as sure about Yehoshua bin Nun. Moshe said to them, "You should pray that my successor, Yehoshua, should succeed with you when you cross the river. Your prayers will be more effective than mine. Even though I prayed with my ultimate strength, Hashem still rejected it for His reasons. But you should know that Hashem will never reject the Jewish people."

On the pasuk in Devarim 3:29, "*va'neishev bagai*," Rashi explains that Moshe told them, "Hakol machul lachem—Everything was forgiven for you. You worshiped idols and, still, Hashem will bring you into Eretz Yisrael. But I was not forgiven."

Moshe taught the people not to worry that he would not be with them. "You have more strength than me myself. You are allowed to go into Eretz Yisrael while I am not. Use your power of prayer and power of Torah. You will be successful and Hashem will help you."

In Parshas Nitzavim, Rashi says the same thing. When the people heard all of the curses of Parshas Ki Savo, Moshe said, "*Atem nitzavim hayom*—Even though you do many sins, Hashem will never abandon you. He has a special loyalty and affection for you. No matter what, you will always be in God's grace."



first Moshe praised G-d, and then he supplicated Him for his request to enter the Land - Chazal learn out that:

לְעוֹלָם יִסְדֵּר אָדָם שְׂבָחוֹ שֶׁל הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, וְאַחֵר כִּף יִתְפַּלֵּל - *a person should always first praise G-d, and then he should pray* (Brachos 32a).

This, indeed is the structure of our daily Amidah. We open with blessings of praise, and only after offering praise, do we request and beseech G-d for our needs and wants.

Why did Moshe want to enter into E"Y? Chazal teach that Moshe, the eved Hashem par excellence, was motivated by the purest intentions, and solely l'Shem Shomayim.

דַּרְשׁ רַבִּי שְׁמַלְאִי: מִפְּנֵי מָה נִתְאַוָּה מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּינוּ לִיְכַנֵּס לְאַרְץ יִשְׂרָאֵל?  
זְכִי לְאֶכּוֹל מִפְּרִיָּהּ הוּא צְרִיךְ! אִו לְשִׁבּוֹעַ מִטּוֹבָהּ הוּא צְרִיךְ! אֶלֶּא  
כִּף אָמַר מֹשֶׁה: הַרְבֵּה מִצְוֹת נִצְטָו יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאִין מִתְקַיְיִמִין אֶלֶּא בְּאַרְץ  
יִשְׂרָאֵל. אֶכַּנֵּס אֲנִי לְאַרְץ כְּדֵי שְׂיִתְקַיְיִמוּ כּוֹלָן עַל יָדֵי

*Why did Moshe desire to enter into E"Y? Did he need to eat of its fruits? Or did he want to be satiated from her physical sustenance and goodness? Neither of these were his motivation. Rather, Moshe said: There are so many mitzvos that the nation has been commanded, and they can only be performed and kept in E"Y. Hence, I will enter the Land so these mitzvos (ha'teluoys ba'Aretz) will be fulfilled through me (Sotah 14a).*

And yet, due to the Divine gezeirah (decree), and despite all of Moshe's 515 tefilos (the gematria of וְאֶתְחַנֵּן), the answer was 'No'. Moshe was not permitted to enter the Land; not in life, nor in death (for burial). Nevertheless, Moshe davened - five hundred and fifteen times! He davened for himself, for the nation, and for all generations. In fact, much of Moshe's leadership revolves around tefillah. For all the times the Israelites sinned, and evoked the wrath of G-d in the desert, there was Moshe, the ever faithful shepherd of the flock, always present leader, who prayed on their behalf.

R' Soloveitchik movingly and stirringly teaches that during prayer, "Contact is established with the Almighty in the abyss of a warm heart, in a love-sick soul, in the

experience of the invisible, in the richness of the inner life, in being aware of something supernal, great, awesome and beautiful, although this 'something' is neither seen nor heart. However devoid of sensuous material this feeling is, it is still an immediate reality, whose impact upon the religious person is enormous. In a word, the aesthetic experience of G-d, whether constructed of impressions and sensations drawn from our daily life, where man is engrossed in images and psychophysical sensuous processes, or consisting of ecstatic emotions, in the throbbing of the heart and the longing of the soul, is the basis of the community of G-d and man.

"It is impossible to imagine prayer without, at the time, feeling the nearness and greatness of the Creator, His absolute justice, His fatherly concern with human affairs, His anger and wrath caused by unjust deeds. When we bow in prayer, we must experience His soothing hand and the infinite love and mercy for His creatures. We cling to Him as a living G-d, not as an idea, as an abstract Being. We are in His company and are certain of His sympathy. There is in prayer an experience of emotions which can only be produced by direct contact with G-d" (*Worship of the Heart*, p.63).

Chazal (Brachos 32b) teach that tefillah needs constant strengthening (effort and concentration to improve), as the pasuk (Tehilim 27:14) says: קוּה אֶל ה' חֹזֵק וְיִצְמַח לְבָבְךָ וְקוּה ה' - *hope to Hashem, strengthen and fortify your heart, and hope to Hashem* (since the pasuk repeats 'hope to Hashem', we learn from here that prayer needs a 'doubling' and strengthening).

May we each strengthen our personal avodah of tefillah, may we merit that our personal and communal tefillos are accepted on the highest heights, may we always feel the closeness to Hashem that comes with prayer, and may we merit the day when we will all be returned to our home, our Land, may it be immediate and in our days.

## Lo Tachmod and Consumerism

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

**T**he second half of the Aseret Hadibrot catalogues heinous moral sins such as murder and adultery. The list concludes with a crime which may not be as horrific as these cardinal sins, but is morally corrosive and almost impossible to avoid. Human beings are desirous

creatures who crave that which they don't currently possess. Yet, despite our innate "longing" for more, the Torah, by issuing the issur of lo tachmod, bans us from coveting the property or goods of others. How can the Torah prohibit an emotion which is so powerfully rooted



in human nature?

A famous solution was suggested the legendary 12th century Spanish philosopher and Biblical commentator known as the Ibn Ezra. Generally, our desires are only sustainable if they are attainable or feasible. Objects of our desire which are unattainable do not hold much sway upon our imaginations. Without any reasonable chance of fulfillment, our desires fade.

To illustrate the relationship between feasibility and desire, the Ibn Ezra narrates a parable about a pauper and a princess. Despite her allure, the pauper is unlikely to covet the princess because the chances of a union are highly improbable. She is completely “out of his league” and lies beyond his boundaries.

By casting another person’s wife or possessions as ‘beyond the pale’ or as unattainable, my covetousness is dampened. Setting boundaries and accepting limitations checks our desire and is Ibn Ezra’s recommended route to lo tachmod discipline.

The Ibn Ezra’s recipe for avoiding covetousness, however, doesn’t factor in an important and conflicting personality trait which is crucial for religious success. Growth in general, and religious growth in particular, is driven by ambition. Ambition smashes boundaries propelling us beyond our current limits. Ambition teaches us not to surrender to limitation but to transcend it. Ambition convinces us that nothing should be seen as unattainable or unfeasible. Ambition is almost the antithesis of the Ibn Ezra’s lo tachmod program!

Perhaps the Ibn Ezra’s parable was effective in a society of rigid hierarchies and less upward mobility, which left little room for ambition. Locked into built-in socio-economic hierarchies, the pauper would never dream of marrying the princess, and so, he abandons any desire.

By contrast, an “ambitious pauper”, one we would admire, would never capitulate to social constraints, but instead, would plot ways of transcending his current limitations. Placing the princess or any other goal “out of bounds” would be a lazy surrender. The lo tachmod challenge is complex because ambition is so vital to our religious development. Without ambition we court complacency. Once ignited though, uncontrolled ambition easily morphs into toxic covetousness.

This is precisely why religiously motivated people often struggle with desire and covetousness. Our Chazal remarked that the greater and more religiously accomplished the person, the harsher his battle with his

yetzer harah. Less motivated people do not burn with religious passion and do not seek much beyond the here and now. Complacent with their current state, they face less of a lo tachmod challenge. Religiously passionate people, however, are constantly searching for new opportunity, and constantly pushing their horizons. That search often leads them to illicit desires.

The goal cannot be repression of ambition. Suppressing ambition in the service of lo tachmod precaution would be tragic. Ultimately, the lo tachmod prohibition forces us to calibrate ambition and acceptance, to delicately balance between drawing boundaries and breaking them. There are goals, generally religious and moral ones, which must be passionately and ambitiously pursued without setting any limits. Regarding material experiences, however, it is crucial to formulate boundaries and look inward rather than upward. Ambition must drive personal and religious achievement, but it shouldn’t flood us with unrestrained covetousness. The prevention of lo tachmod violation is most easily accomplished by stifling ambition. However, without healthy ambition our religious lives become flat. It is not always easy to thread the needle, maintaining healthy ambition while avoiding desirous lo tachmod.

### **Consumerism and Lo Tachmod**

The emergence of Capitalism has reformulated the modern lo tachmod struggle. Capitalism unleashed human freedom and created a free market economy. By extending wealth and prosperity more broadly and equitably, it has dramatically upgraded our standard of living.

Any free-market economy is propelled by supply and demand. Without healthy consumer interest markets will shrivel and innovation will dwindle. Consumer interest generates demand which, in turn, drives supply. Consumer interest is the energy which fuels the entire market economy.

To stimulate consumer interest or demand, modern economies have devised elaborate advertising and marketing methods. These methods have overstimulated consumer interest, creating a social phenomenon called “consumerism”. Capitalism encourages innovation and discovery, consumerism encourages endless and thoughtless purchasing.

Every human being needs to consume to survive. Our “consumerist culture” however, muddles our “wants” and our “needs”, convincing us to consume or purchase goods we have little or limited use for. Instead of purchasing for



functionality, we purchase in pursuit of inner happiness, believing that acquisition of goods will assure personal happiness or social status. In reality, the purchase of goods provides neither. Ironically, the process of longing for something is more gratifying than the actual purchase. As soon we acquire the object we have longed for, it loses its mystique, and we begin to long for our next purchase.

Consumerism has been exacerbated by the transition from a cash-based economy to a credit-based economy, a shift which has greatly simplified the purchasing process. The internet and on-line shopping poured kerosene upon the consumerist fire, by creating a painless and almost automated shopping experience. We can effortlessly order on-line and have it immediately delivered to our doorstep.

Consumerism has overtaken religion, as religious holidays have become consumerist festivals. Thanksgiving, once dedicated to family and to expressing gratitude to G-d, has now become engulfed in Black Friday sales. It was ironic that, this year, Amazon's annual "Prime day" coincided with Bastille Day in France. Two hundred and fifty years ago, on this day, French citizens sacrificed their lives for lofty ideas of democracy. Our generation, meanwhile, was busy on this day searching for deals on tablets and ear buds. Consumerism has colonized national

and religious holidays, emptying them of any substantive symbolism or content.

Additionally, our consumerist culture distorts our identity. The unending discussion surrounding the impact of "consumer price indexes" or "consumer confidence" convinces us that we are all just consumers. We were not placed on this earth primarily to consume, and it must not become our identity. Hashem expects us to be producers, people of mission summoned to divine responsibilities. Despite the seductive whisper of Amazon and Madison Ave., we aren't, fundamentally, consumers.

Lo tachmod was always a complex prohibition. As our lifestyles have changed, the challenge has been reformulated. Indulgent consumerism may not violate the actual legal prohibition of lo tachmod since we do not long for another person's possessions. We can easily buy a different Iphone without coveting someone else's unit. However unrestrained consumerism certainly violates the spirit of lo tachmod. The Torah doesn't demand that we live minimalist lives but, by issuing the prohibition of lo tachmod, it does urge us to temper our desire for acquisitions. Indulgence in rampant consumerism is incongruent with religious identity.

## The Dialectic of Body and Soul

*Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald*

In this week's parasha, parashat Va'etchanan, we encounter several well-known and significant texts. Among the most prominent texts are the Decalogue—the Ten Commandments, and the Shema prayer ("Hear O' Israel"—the first paragraph). Because of the importance of these two texts, other significant statements and issues that are found in this week's parasha are often not paid sufficient attention.

In his final admonition to the Jewish people, before he was to pass from this world, Moses calls on the people to heed G-d's Torah. In his plea, Moses states, Deuteronomy 4:9: רק השמר לך ושומר נפשך מאד, פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו בניך, ועיניך, ופן יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חייך, והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך "Only beware for yourself, and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life, and make them known to your children and your children's children."

In effect, Moses warns the Jewish people that they must never forget the awesome events that they were witness to at Mt. Sinai, where, amidst the thunder and lightning, they received the commandments. They must recall that G-d revealed Himself directly to the people with no intermediary, and that no prophet or philosopher can ever challenge the validity of the Torah.

Our rabbis read further into this text, and distinguish between being aware לך—"l'chah"—for yourself (your body), and נפשך—"naf'sheh'chah"—for your soul. They point out cogently that when the Torah warns about our bodies, it uses the term, רק—"rahk"—"only beware," but when it speaks about our souls it uses the more forceful term מאד—"m'od"—"beware greatly." The Chozeh of Lublin notes, that although one must show concern for the needs of both body and soul, the soul is primary, and therefore the word רק—"rahk"—"only," comes to signify limitation on the attention to be lavished on the body.

For centuries, Jews have maintained that the primary focus of Jewish life is to be on the spirit. The spirit is, after all, what distinguishes Jews from among all the nations of the world, and from the many philosophies that are practiced by others. We who are fortunate to live in this unusually affluent and plentiful generation, where most Jews no longer concern themselves about from where their next meal will come, have been fortunate to witness in this blessed milieu the spiritual explosion in Torah study in both Israel and the Diaspora. In fact, there are probably more full-time students studying Torah today than in any time in Jewish history!

It is quite remarkable to see that more and more talented and committed professionals, who hold advanced secular degrees in many fields—lawyers, doctors, engineers, are often ambivalent about their children’s advanced secular education, instead encouraging the next generation to focus entirely on Torah study. We’ve actually reached a point where we find certain families who, for already three or four generations, have devoted themselves entirely to the calling of Torah. While the obvious concern should be, who will put food on their tables, that does not seem to be on their agenda. Somehow, they manage to make ends meet, often living extremely modest lifestyles. Many thought that the roof would cave in when, several years ago, the government of Israel cut back on subsidies for large religious families. And while it is true that there are more young men now from Chareidi (ultra-Orthodox) backgrounds seeking to enter the job market, the roof has not caved in, and Torah in both Israel and the Diaspora continues to flourish.

The Baal Shem Tov however, had a different view of the interface between body and soul. He maintained that when one’s body becomes weak, the soul experiences a proportional weakening, which is why the Torah adjures Jews to strictly tend to the needs of their bodies. הַשָּׂמֶר לָךְ, beware for yourself, the Baal Shem Tov warned, so that you can fulfill the requirement to beware greatly for your soul!

Furthermore, in Deuteronomy 4:15, we encounter an additional warning, וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם, and you shall beware greatly for your soul. The Talmud, in Berachot 32b, maintains that this verse instructs every person to take

utmost care of their bodies, to safeguard and to properly maintain their physical well-being. The Chofetz Chaim invokes the parable of the wagon driver who pays careful attention to the welfare of his horse, for the horse is the key to his livelihood. Similarly, only with the proper protection of the body, can the soul fulfill its Divine mission.

We live in a society that faces numerous blandishments, many of them due to abundance and wealth. Along with these blandishments come many blessings, but also many challenges. Because we have the gift of abundant food, many members of society are now faced with the challenge of obesity. Exposed to an almost infinite variety of stimuli, our citizens are unable to focus for longer than a sound bite, and many others have become addicted to liquor, drugs and, more recently, to the internet and social media. While we certainly need to focus on the well-being of our souls, now may be the time for all people, especially the Jewish community, to pay more attention to our bodies.

Indeed, this is a time that requires forceful statements from both religious and secular Jewish leaders warning of the ills of overeating, liquor, drug use and cellphone addiction. These leaders need to discourage the growing tendency of “Kiddush clubs,” and over-the-top kiddushes in our synagogues. Our Rabbis and Rebbetzins must encourage everyone to eat and exercise properly and they themselves should be expected to serve as examples for the community. Lay leaders of our communities should also be expected to live up to certain standards of healthy living, and should also encourage the teachers, rabbis and rebbetzins of our communities to take care of themselves properly. This may perhaps be accomplished by instituting creative incentives, such as providing them with prepaid gym memberships, complimentary visits to nutritionists, access to personal trainers, bicycles and treadmills, thus caring for the physical well-being of the teachers and rabbis as they do for their souls and their Torah.

The fact that these instructions regarding concern for physical well-being are included in this particular parasha, parashat Va’etchanan, together with the most vital texts of the Shema and the Ten Commandments, underscores the importance and the critical attention that needs to be placed upon the mitzvah of taking care of our bodies.

# The Song of Tefila

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Parshas Vaeschanan begins with Moshe's heartfelt plea to Hashem that he be allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael. Moshe recalls ואתחנן אל ה' – that he begged Hashem to grant him this privilege.

The Ba'al Ha'turim observes that the word ואתחנן in gematria equals 515 – the same as the gematria of the word שירה (song). This indicates, the Ba'al Ha'turim writes, that אמר לפניו שירה כדי שישמע תפילתו – Moshe Rabbeinu sang when he prayed, in order for this tefila to be accepted. This observation is made also by the Panei'ach Raza, who adds that this teaches us that one should daven in a melody. The Panei'ach Raza references the Talmud Yerushalmi's comment (Pei'a 1:1) explaining the pasuk כבוד את ה' מהונך (Mishlei 3:9) to mean, כבוד את ה' ממה שיחונך – that we must give honor to Hashem with whichever blessings He has given us. If somebody has a pleasant voice, it must be used in the service of Hashem, for davening.

The Otzar Pela'os Ha'Torah adds that just as the Leviyim in the Beis Ha'mikdash would sing while the korbanos

were offered, similarly, our tefilos, which take the place of korbanos, should be recited in melody.

A minyan must not sound like a library. During davening, there should be palpable energy and emotion in the room. Tefila shouldn't be said; it should be sung. Sometimes the niggun of davening will be upbeat and joyous, when we feel grateful, when we celebrate a special occasion, when we've solved a vexing problem, when life is going well and we are overcome by gratitude. Other times, the melody will be somber and express feelings of desperation and urgency. But tefila must be an emotional experience. The shul should be filled with sound, with song, with feeling.

Davening isn't just an item on our "to-do" list, which we do and then place a check mark next to it. It must be accompanied by genuine emotion. Tefila isn't a text that we recite, but rather a song that we sing with feeling, with a longing to draw closer to Hashem.

## Bal Tosif — The Prohibition of Adding On to the Torah

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

Our parsha introduces us to the prohibition of Bal Tosif — of adding on to mitzvot. It is interesting to note that this mitzvah is perhaps unique among the mitzvot in that it receives no mention at all in the first four Chumashim, but then is mentioned twice in Chumash Devarim, both here and in Parshat Re'eh (13:1).

Also noteworthy is the fact that Chazal, in the Sifrei, chose to discuss the parameters of Bal Tosif in their comments on the pasuk in Re'eh, and not on our pasuk, even though it appears earlier in the Torah. The explanation commonly given for this is that Parshat Re'eh is already dealing with the halachic part of Chumash Devarim, which begins in Perek 13, while our pasuk is still in the section of Tochachah (Rebuke) which Moshe is administering to B'nei Yisrael.

However, if we look carefully at these two pesukim, both in terms of their phraseology as well as the context in which they appear, we will see that we are not dealing here with "Mishneh Torah" (repetition of a mitzvah) within Mishneh Torah (Chumash Devarim). Rather, these two

pesukim represent two very different aspects within Bal Tosif.

### Adding a Detail to a Mitzvah and Adding a Mitzvah to Taryag

The definition of Bal Tosif as found in Chazal (Sifrei, *ibid.*) and quoted in Rashi is that it comes to forbid an internal addition to a mitzvah, i.e. to add on a detail to a particular mitzvah, such as having five compartments for the tefillin. Elsewhere, Chazal discuss other ways of "adding on to a mitzvah," such as extending the time for that mitzvah e.g. sleeping in a sukkah on Shemini Atzeret.

However, the Ramban, in his peirush to our pasuk, suggests an additional way of understanding this prohibition:

*In my opinion, even if one decided to fabricate something as an independent mitzvah, for example, if he introduced a new chag in a different month to the Chagim of the Torah, as did Yeravam, he has violated this prohibition.*

The Ramban has opened an entirely new avenue of

understanding Bal Tosif, not as adding a detail to a specific mitzvah, but adding a mitzvah onto Taryag. We note that the Ramban presents this idea as his own opinion, for as we mentioned above, Chazal only discussed Bal Tosif in terms of adding a detail to a mitzvah. Nonetheless, Ramban feels that adding a mitzvah is also part of the prohibition.<sup>1</sup> We might add, Ramban's suggestion would seem to be supported by a kal vachomer. If adding on a particular detail to mitzvah is already a violation of Bal Tosif — even though the body of “Taryag Mitzvot” remains the same — then how much more so if a person seeks to introduce an entirely new mitzvah!

### The Vilna Gaon: Two Parshiyot within Bal Tosif

The Vilna Gaon illuminates the entire sugya of Bal Tosif by demonstrating how the two types of Bal Tosif [adding a detail to a mitzvah and adding a mitzvah to Taryag] are reflected in the two places in the Torah where the prohibition is mentioned.

The pasuk in Re'eh (13:1) states:

אֵת כָּל הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם אֹתוֹ תִשְׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת לֹא תִסְפוּ עָלָיו.  
*The entire word that I command you, that shall you observe to do, you shall not add to it.*

Commenting on this pasuk, the Gaon writes (Aderet Eliyahu, Devarim, ibid.):

*This refers to adding on a detail to the mitzvah itself, for example (adding a fifth species on to) a lulav-bundle, or to tzitzit, by having more than four sets of strings. It is from this pasuk that Chazal (Zevachim 80a) derived the prohibition against adding an application of blood (on the Mizbeach) to a korban that requires four, or to a korban that requires (only) one.*

*With regards to the pasuk in Parshat Va'Etchanan which also forbids adding on to mitzvot, that pasuk is expounded as forbidding adding (a mitzvah) on to the Taryag Mitzvot. For in the beginning (of that pasuk) it says שְׁמַע אֶל הַחֻקִּים וְאֵל הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים, Heed the statutes and laws that I am commanding you to do,” and in that regard it proceeds to state לֹא תִסְפוּ עַל הַחֻקִּים, You shall not add on to the matter<sup>2</sup> that I am commanding you.” In this*

1 Actually, although this second type of Bal Tosif is not referred to by Chazal in the Gemara or collections of midrash halachah, it is found in the Midrash Pesikta Zutrata to this pasuk: “You shall not add on to the mitzvah that I am commanding you ... for example, the festival that Yeravam invented in the month that he fabricated from his heart.”

2 [I.e., the matter of keeping all the mitzvot, mentioned in the beginning of the pasuk.]

*Parsha,*<sup>3</sup> it refers to כָּל הַדְּבָר, the entire matter,” and thus it is here that Chazal expounded that one may not add anything on to the mitzvah itself.

This is pshuto shel mikra at its finest! The very same words are understood as referring to two separate types of Bal Tosif, the parameters of which are derived, not from the words themselves, but from the context in which they were written.

### Rav Betzalel HaKohen

The distinction between the two mentions of Bal Tosif in the Torah is developed by another Torah luminary of Vilna, Rav Betzalel HaKohen, in the generation after the Vilna Gaon.

In his She'eilot U'Teshuvot Reishit Bikkurim (siman 7), he writes:

*It appears to me that in truth we need to explain why the prohibition of Bal Tosif is written in Parshat Va'Etchanan in the plural (לֹא תִסְפוּ) while in Parshat Re'eh it is repeated, but written in the singular (לֹא תִסְפוּ).*

*Therefore, it appears that both pesukim are necessary, for there are two types of Bal Tosif. The pasuk in Va'Etchanan, which was stated in the plural, clearly refers to those who wish to add a mitzvah to Taryag, something which is only really applicable to the Beit Din HaGadol who seeks to introduce a new mitzvah that would be obligatory for all Am Yisrael. It is with regard to this that the pasuk states “לֹא תִסְפוּ” in the plural, for this prohibition applies to the group of people who make up the Sanhedrin.*

*In contrast, when the Torah repeats this prohibition in Parshat Re'eh, it does so using the singular form, for this clearly refers to any individual who seeks to add a detail on to a mitzvah beyond that which is either written in the Torah, or known to us through a kabbalah (tradition) of Torah Shebaal Peh. For example, one who adds a berachah to birkat Kohanim which was not specified in the Torah, or adds a fifth species to the lulav-bundle, or a fifth compartment to the tefillin. It is regarding this type of addition that each individual is told “לֹא תִסְפוּ” in the singular.*

*It is for this reason the drashah of Chazal regarding adding on to lulav, tzitzit, and Birkat Kohanim was only mentioned in Parshat Re'eh, not [earlier] in Parshat Va'Etchanan. This similarly explains why the Rambam and all others who codified the mitzvot quoted the pasuk in Parshat Re'eh as the source for the prohibition of Bal Tosif, and not the earlier pasuk in Parshat Va'Etchanan. For these mefarshim were discussing*

3 I.e. Parshat Re'eh where Bal Tosif is mentioned a second time.



*the prohibition against adding on a detail to the mitzvah itself, therefore they quoted the pasuk in Re'eh which is written in the singular form and addresses the individual.*

The very same distinction arrived at by the Vilna Gaon through paying attention to the context of the two prohibitions is arrived at by Rav Betzalel by noting the grammatical form of the prohibitions themselves! We should add that it is clear that Rav Betzalel does not mean to say that the first type of Bal Tosif (adding a mitzvah) applies only to the Sanhedrin, while the second type (adding a detail) applies only to the individual. Rather, it is through phrasing the prohibitions in terms of who might typically come to violate them, (דיבר הכתוב בהוה) the Torah allows us to understand the type of Bal Tosif that it is referring to. Adding a new mitzvah would typically be a concern regarding the Sanhedrin, while adding a detail would typically be a concern regarding the individual performing the mitzvah.