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Bechukotai 5784

In This Hour of Crisis

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered May 27, 1967)

This is an hour of crisis, not only for Israel as a State but for Israel as a people.¹ Our destiny, and the destiny of our children and children's children after us, is being forged by the soldiers of Israel on lonely outposts in the Gaza strip and on the heights overlooking the Gulf of Aqaba.² No Jew can afford to look upon the tense situation as an outsider. As Mordecai the Jew said to Queen Esther, highly placed in non-Jewish society and politics, *al tedami be'nafshekh le'himalet beit avikh* – do not imagine that you will find safety whilst danger befalls the rest of the House of Israel.

The Arab guns aimed at the heart of the State are aimed at our hearts. The stranglehold on the Gulf of Aqaba, the lifeline of the medinah, is a stranglehold on our throats. And the Russian contempt for the State of Israel bespeaks the old, traditional Russian contempt for all of us as Jews.

How ought we react in this grave hour? How have Jews always and should Jews now react?

The archetypal and symbolic confrontation between Israel and its enemies was that between Jacob and Esau. When Jacob, surrounded by his wives and children and his retinue, heard that the armed columns of Esau were marching towards him with vengeance in their hearts, the Rabbis tell us that he prepared a threefold strategy: *le'tefillah, le'doron, u-le'milhamah*, he prepared himself for prayer, for gifts, and for war. It is this threefold approach that must become the pattern for our attitude as well.

The *doron*, or gift, that Jacob presented to his brother was a form of legitimate appeasement of a bloodthirsty aggressor, in an attempt to turn his hatred into good will. Indeed, it happened to work with Jacob. But it cannot work for Israel today. First, you cannot placate an enemy who is implacable. Those of us who saw King Faisal on television two days ago heard him declare his avowed intention of exterminating Israel, and President Nasser said the same thing yesterday. Nothing less than that would satisfy our

enemies. Moreover, Israel has nothing left to give. It has given all but the bare skeletal structure necessary for the survival of a modern country.

Hence, our *doron* must be the gift that we American Jews are going to give to the Jews and the government of the State of Israel; in other words, our accelerated participation in that great and historic venture known as the UJA. No Jew who fails to give, and to significantly increase his pledge over the past, has a moral right to be proud that he is a Jew. This year Israel faces unusual economic difficulty; the present fall-off in tourism, together with the stupendous military expenditures that it must undertake, make the situation and the need grave indeed. Those who will therefore give this year far in excess of what they gave in the past, and far in excess of what they are able to give, will be performing an invaluable service. Those who do not do so are, with all their talk, valueless for Israel. Their talk, their worry, their advice, their concern, their pride, their keeping their ears glued to the radio – all this is meaningless!

The Jewish Center family will have an opportunity on June 7³ to demonstrate the extent of its commitment. I should like to see an enthusiastic response like never before. It behooves us to give our *doron* before we are solicited, and to prepare a gift that will tell Israel that we have not faltered, and all the world that Israel does not stand alone.

The second part of that strategy is *milhamah*, war. Can we participate in *milhamah* if it should be necessary?

Yes we can, and yes it is necessary. There are many ways to fight a war, many fronts, and many weapons. Our contribution, though not military, must not be underestimated.

For one thing, we must undertake an indefatigable political campaign. As members of a subculture in this great democracy, it is entirely proper that we make our opinion felt where such opinions carry weight. We must undertake to inform, by letter and telegram, our President that we

support his support of Israel, and to tell him as well as our Senators and Representatives that it was at the urging of an American Secretary of State that Israel gave up much of its precious victory in Sinai, and that the United States has treaty obligations to Israel. This is one campaign in which we can participate immediately after the Sabbath is over.

Another way of making our political influence felt, in a more social manner, will come tomorrow morning when we shall participate physically in demonstrating our support for the State of Israel. We must all take our families and be present at the "Salute to Israel Parade."

Even more directly, our young people can volunteer to help in Israel. Let them be encouraged. American law forbids military service on behalf of a foreign power. But there is much urgent work to be done, taking the places of Israel's men and women who have been pressed into military service. People are urgently needed, and young people should by all means participate in the "Summer Work in Israel" program which has now been expanded, and in the "*Sherut La'am*" which offers one or two years of service in Israel. The medical services and all other specialties are urgently needed; but Israel even needs people just to dig trenches and build shelters.

So far, it is good to report that results have been most encouraging. Let no one henceforth speak flippantly of "the vanishing Jews of America!" The volunteer offers have been extremely heartening. I am told that only yesterday a surgeon called from San Francisco to New York to offer his services provided that his two sons would be taken with him. Of particular interest to this congregation is the fact that a brief notice pinned on the bulletin board at Yeshiva University produced, in 36 hours, more than 300 volunteers! I myself have been on the phone with a number of students, including a number of young ladies, from Yavneh,⁴ who have asked my intercession with their families to permit them to go forthwith to Israel. There is something ineffably precious about the Jewish soul which allows it to express its idealism so immediately and so openly. Each in his own way, therefore, can participate in this great *milhamah*.

We are an irenic, peace-loving people. Our hopes and prayers are for peace not only for us but for the entire world. The author of "*Or ha-Hayyim*" has made this comment in a beautiful interpretation of a verse in today's Sidra. We read *vi'yeshavtem la-vetah be'artzekhem*, "And ye shall dwell securely in your land," followed by *ve'natati shalom ba-aretz*, "And I shall give peace to the land." But, asks the "*Or ha-Hayyim*," if we already are told that God will let us dwell securely in our land, surely that includes

peace, and why then repeat the promise that God will give peace to the land? In his answer he distinguishes between *artzekhem* and *eretz*: the first verse refers to security in *artzekhem*, "your land," which means the Land of Israel. The second verse, however, refers to the granting of peace in *eretz*, which should be translated not "the land," but "the world!" In addition to our own national security, we are committed to the great hope and striving for peace throughout the world.

However, when duty and destiny call upon us to work so that others might bear arms on behalf of Israel, or even, if need be, that we do so ourselves, we shall not be found hesitating or faltering! If we were a nation like unto other nations, this fight would still be noble, but natural. Our existence is at stake, and we shall not submit to the murderous ambitions of that Hitler of the Nile, to those hysterical pygmies of Damascus, or to that venal and obnoxious monarch of the desert kingdom of slave traders.⁵

But Israel is more than that. The creation of the State of Israel was the minimum act by the powers of the world by which they salvaged the barest trace of human dignity left to them. Israel is a state conceived in the ghettos of Europe, born in the death camps of Auschwitz and Treblinka, delivered in the detention camps of Cyprus, and swaddled in the rags by which the Western powers blindfolded themselves to our agony and stuffed their ears not to hear our cry of anguish.

Israel is a penance paid by Russia for Babi Yar, by England for the Struma,⁶ by the United States for its refusal to hear the cry of the refugees in time, by the Catholic countries for the silence of the Deputy Pope, by each and every country for its own public and private crimes against the people of the Lord.

When we shall, therefore, act in defense of Israel, we will be fighting not only for Israel's and our existence, but in effect for the honor of Russia and England and America and France and all of mankind, whether they know it or not, realize or not, care or not, appreciate it or not, even whether they want it or not. For we shall ever remain, as Yehudah Halevi has called us, the heart of the nations and their conscience.

Tani be'shem Rab Elazar, ha-sayaf ve'ha-sefer nitnu mekorakhin min ha-shamayim. The word and the Book were given wrapped together from Heaven. We have given the world its sefer, its Book. We shall, if need be, now defend the *sefer*, and the *am ha-sefer* (People of the Book) with a *sayaf* (sword) of courage and honor. For that charge and that mission is *min-hashamayim*, decreed from Heaven!

Finally, the third element in this Jewish strategy first taught by Jacob is *tefillah*, prayer. We can perform that by keeping the present situation in mind every time we speak, in our *tefillot*, of Jerusalem and Zion. In addition, we shall at the conclusion of services today recite special prayers for the welfare of the State of Israel.

But wedded to prayer is the concept of hope. Our prayer and our outlook must always be hopeful, never desperate.

I would like to commend to your attention an insight which speaks not only of hope but offers a perspective that goes far beyond that parochial limits of power politics. Our Sidra, in enumerating the blessings God promises us, says: *u-faniti alekhem*, “and I shall turn to you,” *ve’hifreti etkhem ve’hirbeti etkhem ...*, “and I shall increase you, and make you fruitful, and keep My covenant with you.”

On the words *u-faniti alekhem*, “I shall turn to you,” Rashi quotes the sages: *Ipaneh mi-kol asakai le’shalem sekharkhem*, “I shall turn away from all My other preoccupations in order to grant you your reward.”

What a strange remark! Are we really to take that so anthropomorphically, so primitively? Is God “busy” with other matters so that He has to take “time off” in order to pay loving attention to us?

An answer is provided to us by Rabbi Mordecai Rogov of Chicago, in his work “*Ateret Mordecai*.” He points to the Midrash which states in the name of Rabbi Samuel b. Nachman, that God says: *ki anokhi yadati et ha-mahshavot*, for I know the thoughts of all men. Applying that to the story of Joseph and his brothers, the Midrash tells us that the brothers were preoccupied with the selling of Joseph, Joseph was busy bemoaning his own bitter fate, Judah was involved in looking for a wife – but *ve’ha-Kadosh barukh Hu hayah asuk be’oro shel Mashiah*, all this while, God was preoccupied with the light of the Messiah! Each of the actors in the great drama thought that he knew the whole story. The brothers saw this as an act of vengeance, Joseph as a bitter tragedy that had reached its nadir, Judah was altogether distracted by an extraneous matter. None of them really saw the entire episode in its true, ultimate perspective. None of them realized that God was not “busy” moving affairs as he individually saw it, but that the Almighty was simply making preparations for the ultimate development of Jewish history, leading to the final redemption. The Joseph story, even more than others, reveals how human intention and Divine design can sometimes be utterly different and yet mesh with each other, and how the Divine plan often uses humans who do not even appreciate the role that they play.

Man, by virtue of his natural human limitations, can

see only a segment of reality and experience. But if man is wise, he recognizes this, and he understands that beyond his own comprehension there is a God Whose own designs defy our pitiful human attempts at probing His mysteries. We are all actors who play significant roles in a great drama; but few of us ever have any inkling of the extent and direction of the plot.

So it is with the current episode. Today the Arabs are thinking of a quick victory. Russia sees the entire incident as a chance to dislodge the United States from Vietnam. Israel views it as one great crisis that must be overcome. The United States considers it as an added complication forcing it to juggle both Near-Eastern and Far-Eastern commitments. The United Nations regards it as a need to make up for U Thant’s blunder, the biggest in the history of diplomacy.⁷

But our hope and our confidence is that God will take “time out” from these individual considerations of the protagonists of the drama and ultimately reveal to us His true preoccupation: *ve’ha-Kadosh barukh Hu hayah asuk be’oro shel Mashiah*, that Almighty God is weaving all these political and military strands into the garment of light that the Messiah will wear, into the intricate designs by which there will come to Israel and all the world the *geulah shelemah*, the complete redemption.

May, indeed, all our heartache and anxiety, all our worry and preparation for war, be transcended by the yeshuah, by the great victory and salvation which will come, speedily in our day. *Ve’shalom al Yisrael* – and may peace arrive for Israel and all mankind.

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

1. Ed. note: This sermon was delivered just days before the outbreak of the Six Day War.
2. Ed. note: Egyptian President Nasser’s decisions to ask for the removal of the UN peacekeepers from Sinai and especially to block the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping via the Straits of Tiran are commonly accepted as the point where war became inevitable. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origins_of_the_Six-Day_War.
3. Ed. note: Rabbi Lamm refers here to the Salute to Israel Parade, now called the Celebrate Israel Parade.
4. Ed. note: Yavneh was an Orthodox college student group. Rabbi Lamm served as the organization’s chairman for a number of years.
5. Ed. note: These are references to the leadership of Egypt (Nasser), Syria (the Ba’ath party), and Jordan (King Hussein) respectively.
6. Ed. note: The Struma disaster was the sinking on 24 February 1942 of a ship, MV Struma, which had been trying to take nearly 800 Jewish refugees from the Axis member Romania to Mandatory Palestine. After the ship failed, British diplomats and Turkish officials negotiated over the fate of the passengers. Because of Arab and Jewish unrest in Palestine, the British government was

determined to apply the terms of the White Paper of 1939 to minimize Jewish immigration to Palestine. British diplomats urged the Turkish government of Refik Saydam to prevent Struma from continuing her voyage. When the Turks denied its entry and the British forbade it from proceeding to Palestine, the unseaworthy vessel was forced to leave harbor. The Turkish authorities abandoned the ship in the Black Sea, about 10 miles north of the Bosphorus, where she drifted helplessly. On the morning of 24

February there was a huge explosion, and the ship sank. Many years later it was revealed that the ship had been torpedoed by the USSR Shch-213. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Struma_disaster
7. Ed. note: Then-Secretary General of the United Nations U Thant was widely criticized for acceding to Egypt's May 1967 demand that UN peacekeeping troops evacuate Egypt, opening the door to war. https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria_jun05/meria05_cam01.pdf

Not Too Disgusting

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In parshas Bechukosai, God tells us that if we study His Torah assiduously and fulfill His mitzvos, he will bestow many blessings upon us. Among these blessings that He will bestow is that He will dwell among us. The wording of this blessing, however, needs to be understood. He tells us, "I will place My sanctuary among you, and My soul will not reject you" (Vayikra 26:11). A number of commentators point out that the second half of the verse seems to be obvious and superfluous. If God will place His sanctuary among us, meaning that His divine presence - the shechina - will dwell among us, isn't it obvious that His soul will not reject us? Rabbeinu Bachya, in his commentary, explains that, in this verse, God's soul does not refer to his shechina, as His sanctuary does, but to a different kind of manifestation of the divine presence. Readers attuned to these different terms, as explained in kabbalah, are referred to these comments. We will mention other answers that are geared to the common understanding of the verse, taking God's sanctuary and God's soul as referring to the same manifestations of His presence, and thus leaving us with the question of the need for a meaning of the second half of the verse.

The Netziv, in his Ha'amek Davar, says that no matter how true the people are to the Torah, there will always be some individuals who deviate from it. God, in his blessing, is telling the people that when they, as a whole, follow the Torah, He will dwell among them, and will not reject them

due to the few among them who deviate. This is analogous to a father with a large, devoted, family, who has one child who sometimes acts in a disgusting manner. Rather than reject the family, he will tolerate that son and continue his close relationship. God, in blessing the people, acts similarly, and does not reject the people due to the few sinners among them.

Rav Dovid Feinstein, in a shiur on the parsha, offered a different explanation. He said that when one grows close to another, he gets to know all of his various habits, some of which may not be appealing, and will, as a result, distance himself from him. God, however, does not act in this way. Rather, He tells us that when we follow His Torah, he becomes very close to us, and he sees us doing something that might disgust others, He will nevertheless not reject us, but continue to dwell among us.

The explanations of the Netziv and Rav Dovid Feinstein carry messages for us in our daily lives, as well. The Talmud tells that we must emulate the way of God. Just as God is merciful and compassionate, so, too, must we be merciful and compassionate. We learn, from God's bestowal of blessings, that when He dwells among us, he does not cut off the relationship because of a few deviant individuals, nor does he reject any one of us due to a particularly offensive, singular act. The love that He has for his people moves Him to tolerate these deviations, and, following the directive of the Talmud, we should strive to act in a similar manner. .

Blessings, Curses, and Our Mission to Improve the World

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed by TurboScribe.ai and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim)

There's a famous question asked by Ba'alei Machshava and discussed at length by Kli Yakar in this week's Parsha. What happens when you keep the Torah? *Im bechukosai teileichu*—if you keep the Torah, you will have rain, flocks and herds, grapes, wheat

and barley, peace and prosperity, etc. It's the best gashmius you could imagine. And what would happen if you did the opposite, Chas ve-shalom? You will experience bad things in this world. But isn't the goal of life ruchnius and not gashmius? How much gashmius can you have? A hundred,

one hundred and twenty years' worth? It's the bat of an eyelash compared to eternity. The Torah should have said: *Im bechukosai teileichu*—when you keep the Torah you go to Olam Ha-Bah—*Yom shekulo tov, Yom shekulo aruch*. It's infinitely greater, quantitatively and qualitatively, than all the gashmius blessings in the Torah. And there's Gehinom, unfortunately, which is infinitely worse than all the curses in the Torah. So why focus on gashmius and Olam Ha-Zeh, instead of the much greater reward and punishment in Olam Ha-Bah?

Maharal suggests one unique and fascinating approach, among the numerous answers given over the centuries (and we have a lot to learn from each). Why does Torah openly discuss only Olam Ha-Zeh, and not Olam Ha-Bah (which we darshen out be-remez) or anything that happens after you die? It comes down to a fundamental machlokes. Mesilas Yesharim says in his introduction that the Torah teaches you what we must do in order to get to Olam Ha-Bah. But Maharal here takes a slightly different approach. Hashem gave us the Torah as an instruction manual to perfect Olam Ha-Zeh. A well known Medrash describes Moshe going up Har Sinai to get the Torah. The Malachim complain: Why are You sending this Torah down to the physical world? The Torah should stay here in heaven, be- kedusha u-be-tahara. And Moshe responds: What does it say in the Torah? Honor your parents. Only humans have parents, and the Malachim don't. It says: Don't steal. Only humans have business dealings and private property. It says: Don't commit adultery, etc., etc. And this applies to all the mitzvos in the Torah—even to building a ma'akeh around your roof and attaching Mezuzah to your house. There are no roofs or houses in heaven. Mitzvos are all Olam Ha-Zeh matters. That's not to say we should drag the Torah down to our level. The purpose of the Torah is to perfect the gashmius of Olam Ha-Zeh to be the most spiritual it possibly can be. And Maharal explains: In heaven, you have pure ruchnius. The heavens don't need the Torah. Olam Ha-Bah is a perfect world, and you can't improve perfection. This world is imperfect. And that gives us the responsibility and capability to improve it. Torah is all about improving this world. And this gives us a new perspective on the Tochacha.

Many Mefarshim ask on the Tochacha: Why does the Torah imply that we should serve Hashem for the physical incentives? What happened to serving Hashem Lishmah? Maharal implies here that these apparent rewards in the Tochacha are not simply incentives. Rather, the Torah tells us that if we do all the mitzvos, we'll perfect Olam Ha-Zeh

to the point that war, disease, and drought will naturally disappear. We'll see that all the imperfections of this world come from our improper behavior. And when we treat Olam Ha-Zeh the way we should, we'll find it more perfect than we thought it could be. And that's the chiddush of this Maharal and what really makes the Torah unique. There are many religious and philosophical traditions where you become holy by meditating about G-d. The chiddush of the Torah is that you choose how to act, which food to eat, etc. You become holy when you choose to act properly in your family life, business, or profession—whether you're a lawyer, a plumber, an electrician, or a hedge fund manager, etc. Everything in life—even the most mundane stick and pebble—has mitzvos attached to it and can be used to add kedusha to Olam Ha-Zeh. Therefore, on the one hand, we must remember that the greatest reward that we can get is Olam Ha-Bah—as the Mishnah says in Pirkei Avos: *Haskein atzmecha ba-prozdor, kedei she-tikaneis la-traklin*. The koras ruach of Olam Ha-Bah is greater than anything in Olam Ha-Zeh—*Yafeh sha'a achas shel koras ruach ba-Olam Ha-Bah mikol chaye ha-Olam Ha-Zeh*. And Hshem doesn't need our help in Olam Ha-Bah. He created it as a perfect world. But on the other hand—*Yafeh sha'a achas bi-teshuva u-ma'asim tovim ba-Olam Ha-Zeh*. What we perfect in Olam Ha-Zeh with our Torah u-mitzvos is greater than the entire Olam Ha-Bah.

You'll enjoy Olam Ha-Bah much more than anything in this world. But HaShem says: I want to tell you about Olam Ha-Zeh because I will get the most nachas ruach when you take responsibility to fix Olam Ha-Zeh and make it the greatest you can by doing mitzvos and infusing ruchnius into every aspect of the physical world.

And I think that's really the pshat in the Mishna in Avos—*Yafeh sha'a achas bi-teshuva u-ma'asim tovim ba-Olam Ha-Zeh*. Olam Ha-Bah is much greater than anything Hashem gives us in Olam Ha-Zeh, and the Torah should have mentioned it. But the Torah is about what we can do, kaveyachol, for HaShem. HaShem says, focus on this world and fix it. Realize that everything you do in this world has a hashpa'ah.

I'll end with one point. You know, there are a lot of crazy things going on in this world—drought and pestilence, war and crime, etc. There's a lot of suffering in this world. Millions of people are oppressed. Some would criticize us: Why are you sitting here, learning Gemara and what brachah to make on granola bars? Go out and do Tikam Olam in Africa—save some people. And others would say, who cares about all the physical suffering in this world?

Only *ruchnius* is important—learning another *daf* of *Shor she-Nogach es ha-Parah*, etc. And Maharal would say they're both wrong. HaShem put us in this world to fix this world. But if you go on a mission to Africa and ignore *ruchnius*, you will not succeed. You'll only put a band-aid on the world or stick your finger in the dyke, which would not

Engraved Memories

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Parshat Bechukotai opens with an “if... then...” proposition. If you keep My laws, God says, there will be economic prosperity and physical security. In introducing the “if” side of the equation, the opening verse contains three ways of communicating that we must follow God's laws: (1) “If you walk in my statutes,” (2) “and keep my commandments,” (3) “and do them” (Lev. 26:3). This is seemingly redundant. If there are no extraneous details in the Torah, why the repetition? Rashi, quoting a midrash, suggests that the first part of the verse, “If you walk in my statutes,” advocates for the laborious study of Torah.

The words in Hebrew for the first phrase, “If you walk in my statutes,” are “im bechukotai tei'leichu.” The word *chok* is commonly understood as laws that transcend rational explanation. The first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, suggests that *chok* can also be understood as related to the word *chakak*, to engrave. There is a fundamental difference between writing on parchment and engraving on stone. When inscribing on parchment, the ink never becomes part of the parchment; they remain two distinct entities. Engraving, however, is embedded within the stone. It remains one entity. We need to learn Torah to the point that it becomes ingrained in our being.

In a seminal article about the importance of memory in rabbinic literature, Shlomo Naeh, professor of Talmud at Hebrew University, contends that the Talmudic sages conceptualized the learning and memorizing of Torah content as a physiological process, whereby the concepts are suffused within the body of the sage. Through reviewing, reciting, and memorizing, the Torah became an embodied part of the learner. This is no mere metaphor. Rava critiques the masses for standing for a Sefer Torah, but not a Torah scholar (Makkot 22b), because the scholar also has the words of Torah engraved into his body.

Many modern researchers suggest that memory is “engraved,” as it were, in the brain through neural networks. According to the theory of long-term potentiation, when two neurons are activated at the same time, the

help anything in the long run. If you are really serious about fixing everything in this world—the more mitzvos you do, the more you take everything in the world, use it the right way, and bring it to the right level—the more you move the world to its *ruchnius* and *gashmius* perfection. And that's why HaShem put us here and gave us the Torah.

connection between them strengthens. The more times an idea is reviewed, a stronger neural connection is created, forming more elaborate and durable memories that can be retrieved more quickly. Following this mental model, retaining Torah information can be understood as a literal physiological manifestation of Torah ideas being engraved into our minds.

This concept is not just intellectual, limited to the mind and ideas, but is also essential for character and virtue. As Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm powerfully formulates his 1965 drasha, “The Tablets Within,” the laws and values of the Torah need to become an integrated part of the human being. They need to be “organically bound up with your own soul and heart and mind, integrated into your personality.” No matter what challenges and changes we encounter in life, our relationship and identification with God and Torah is “permanent, unexchangeable, and indelible.”

The statutes are not just meant to be learned, but to be acted out - “If you walk in my statutes.” The repetitive performance of the commandments decreed by the divine will creates an embedded habit, influencing our emotions and behavior. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests in his explanation of *chukim* in Parshat Chukat, “Just as a statute is carved into stone, so a behavioral habit is carved in depth into our unconscious mind and alters our instinctual responses.” This contrasts with the curses enumerated in Parshat Bechukotai which are a consequence of walking with God *keri*, occasionally, or irregularly (Lev. 26:21). This sporadic stance is not enough to build the muscle memory and to create the holy habits encouraged by God.

A beautiful midrash expresses this idea by connecting “If you walk in my statutes” to a verse in Psalms, “I consider my ways, and I direct my feet to Your precepts” (Psalms 119:59). “David said,” according to this midrash, “‘Master of the universe, each and every day, I would calculate and say: I am going to this place and that residence, but my legs would take me to synagogues and study halls.’ That

is what is written: ‘And I direct my feet to your precepts.’” Through consistent repetition, King David created a habit so entrenched in his body, that his feet instinctively led him to spiritual pursuits.

Flourishing comes when we personify Torah ideas and

Doctors: Good or Bad?

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Parshat Bechukotai envisions a world of clear reward and punishment. A Jewish nation that follows Hashem in Israel merits bounty and security; a Jewish nation that abandons Hashem, Gd forbid, will suffer and be evicted from the land. On this passage, Ramban commented that when we follow Hashem, our affairs are not governed by nature. There is no illness unless we sin. Righteous people who fall ill are supposed to pursue help from prophets, not doctors. Although the Torah does describe resorting to doctors to treat injury (Shemot 21:19), that is descriptive rather than prescriptive. (Commentary to Vayikra 26:11)

But Ramban’s comment is difficult, as he explicitly endorses medical practice in his halachic work *Torat Ha’Adam*. How do we resolve this?

According to Rabbi Chaim Yosef Dovid Azulai (*Birkei Yosef*, Yoreh Deah 336), Ramban believed that patients are wrong for seeking doctors. However, a doctor who is faced with patient should, indeed, treat the patient.

Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (*Tzitz Eliezer* 5:Ramat Rachel 20:3) argues that Rav Azulai’s approach is inconsistent with Ramban’s own words. Rather, Ramban distinguished between two eras. In an era of prophecy, one who is ill goes to prophets. But in an era when we are

Playing G-d

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Judaism asserts that nothing is random. Large-scale events in particular, are divinely authored and possess both purpose and design. Hashem isn’t arbitrary and doesn’t abandon His world to chance. Our successes and our failures, our triumphs and our suffering are all supervised by one all-knowing G-d. We may not always fully understand His design but it exists. Nothing is random.

The covenant described in parshat Bechukotai is premised upon divine providence. If we obey divine will, we prosper and live securely in Israel. If we betray Hashem’s wishes

behaviors. Through laborious study, the concepts become engraved in our minds. Through repetitive actions, the behaviors become habitual. By following this prescription, may we merit receiving all of God’s blessings and protections.

deprived of prophets, it is meritorious to seek medical help. Rav Waldenberg writes, “Since the great majority of people do not merit healing via miracles from Heaven, and the Torah itself says not to depend upon miracles, the Torah’s permission to pursue healing applies to patients as well. Further, it is a mitzvah and obligation, since one’s life depends upon it.”

In a third approach, a strong comment is attributed to Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in the name of his grandfather Rav Chaim Brisker: “The Rav had no patience for philosophies that glorified passivity and reliance on miracles. At the beginning of the 1960’s, a few years after the launch of Sputnik, I had occasion to talk with the Rav about those people who claimed that man should not reach out for the heavens, for ‘the heavens are the heavens of Gd,’ and only ‘the earth is given to human beings.’ The Rav heaped scorn upon them. One of those present jumped up to protest: ‘But Rabbi, the Ramban in Bechukotai (Vayikra 26:11) speaks about how a person should have faith in the Holy One, and not to delve into matters that are too wondrous for him.’ The Rav replied, ‘I heard from my father, in the name of my grandfather, that the Ramban never uttered that statement!’” (Dr. Aviad haCohen Rav Soloveitchik’s *Approach To Zionism*).

and are disloyal, we are expelled from the land of Israel. Having absorbed the lessons of divine punishment we are expected to improve our behavior. If we remain callous and indifferent, insisting that our suffering is random or ‘keri’, Hashem withdraws His supervision and subjects us to a world of chaos. In effect, we select our own arrangement. If we connect the dots and attribute suffering to our errant behavior, we continue to live under Hashem’s providence. If we impute events to mere chance, our lives become random.

Every major event contains divine messaging. Over the past few months the search for those messages has

intensified. Obviously, a tragedy as enormous as October 7th contains religious implications. Hashem is telling us something.

Not only do we probe tragedies, but we also assume divine purpose and authorship for victories and successes. The miraculous protection of our country against the vicious Iranian missile attack was, obviously, a divine intervention. The helicopter crash which took the life of a cruel and murderous thug serving as president of Iran was also divine reckoning. We look for the divine calculus behind tragedy and triumph.

Sometimes though, we go too far. Sometimes we are too self-assured and too self-confident. Playing G-d, we sometime hurl harsh accusations at groups whose wayward behavior we deem responsible for divine punishment.

What are the dangers of playing G-d and how can we search for divine meaning without crossing the boundary between heaven and earth?

Encroachment

Though we are encouraged to probe for divine purpose, and to discover meaning behind religion, there are areas which are meant to remain off limits, or at least severely restricted to human inquiry. Too much investigation of these issues encroaches upon the divine realm. For example, the study of kabbalah was traditionally limited to small groups and extended only to those above the age of 40. Popularizing the study of cosmological mysteries is an invasion of Hashem's "private" domain. Similarly, ambitious messianic prognostication trespasses Hashem's private realm of historical decision making. Playing G-d by attributing tragedy to specific sins is an appropriation of divine calculus and an affront to the divine mystery.

Arrogance

Not only is playing G-d invasive it is also arrogant. Bilam, the pagan sorcerer haughtily boasted that he alone discerned Hashem's will. In response to his false pride, he was reduced to a cartoonish parody unable to answer his talking donkey and blind to an angel who impeded his path.

Iyov attempted to comprehend the suffering of the righteous and to justify the ways of G-d to Man. By answering him through a blinding storm, Hashem humbled him, cautioning him not to arrogate even the presumption of knowing the will of Hashem. Playing G-d trespasses upon the heavens and additionally is conceited and arrogant.

An unruly world

Playing G-d also misdiagnoses our current historical

phase. Earlier periods of history were characterized by obvious and transparent cause and effect. Good deeds were immediately rewarded, and sins were punished. Though this system seems harsh, it encouraged more conscientious self-examination: imagine if every serious sin was followed by a bout with Covid-19. We would probably avoid sins more successfully than we currently do.

With our expulsion from Israel the world shifted into a different system of divine management, called *hester panim*, in which cause and effect remain hidden from human analyses. Though we have achieved political sovereignty and returned to Israel we still labor in a world in which cause and effect are veiled. Playing G-d ignores this historical reality, while simplistically superimposing the guidelines of an earlier period of Jewish history. Just as the Torah cautions against assuming "randomness" in a world of divine providence, we should be careful about outlining direct cause and effect in a world which is still circuitous and convoluted.

Selective Calculus

Often, divine reasoning is articulated only when it suits our needs or our own predetermined ideological positions. Our mapping of divine logic ends up being both one-sided and intellectually dishonest. We celebrate the story of people who left the Azza communities before the attack and were spared, yet we ignore the outside visitors to those communities who were murdered. We revel in stories of individuals who missed a flight which ended up crashing. Yet we don't tell the full story of the hundreds of passengers who did board the flight and were killed.

This selective calculation of divine purpose manipulates divine calculus for our own personal agenda, is easily transparent, and often leads to ridicule.

Insensitivity

Finally, we often play G-d at the expense of human suffering. Even if divine reason exists, there is time and place for everything, including silence. The last thing people who suffer tragedy want to hear is who is responsible, or worse, that they themselves, directly or indirectly, share the blame. This is the worst crime of playing G-d. It is inhuman and hurtful.

A friend once remarked that in the immediate hours after Sept 11th his son's teacher issued a scolding critique of Western culture, pointing to the attack of the Twin Towers as evidence that Hashem punished the excesses of Capitalism. I responded that he should remove his son from that school. Any person who doesn't possess basic

decency not to dance on other people's suffering should not be instructing the Torah of a compassionate G-d.

Before pontificating about Hashem's reasons, human suffering must be acknowledged, and sympathy must be heartfelt. More often than not, when we speak in the name of G-d, we accuse others of causing our collective tragedies. This is ugly triumphalism as the cost of broken hearts and at the cost of human pain and suffering.

How can we calibrate finding divine purpose and avoiding self-righteousness?

Our comments must be phrased with humility. We should preface our ideas with phrases reflective of our own uncertainty and which exude humility and intellectual modesty. Prefacing our comments with phrases such as "perhaps", "possibly", "it may be true that" or "without fully knowing it seems that" convey honesty, unpretentiousness, and sensitivity rather than smugness or self-assuredness.

Furthermore, we should always turn inward. The gemara

in Berachot (5a) claims that in response to suffering a person should inspect their own behavior rather than scrutinizing the flaws of others. Lessons should first be drawn inward rather than fingers being pointed outward. First improve our own prayer, Torah study and personal behavior before castigating others for their own religious flaws.

Finally, our thoughts should be broad rather than specific. Instead of pointing to specific flaws and highlighting specific sins we should ask larger questions: what lessons about our society at large does this tragedy underline? What lessons about Jewish history and our return to this land does Hashem want us to take away? Instead of blaming October 7th upon specific sins we should be pondering the larger questions of Jewish identity, our rights to this land, the relationship between different sectors in Israel and the relationship between our people in Israel and Jews overseas. Stop the finger pointing. It's rude.

The Klalos and Jewish Destiny

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

With this week's parsha, Parsha Bechukosai, we close the book of Vayikra once again. Bechukosai is a short parsha which deals with two main topics: the klalos (curses) that will befall Israel in exile (Vayikra 26), and arachin (valuations), when one dedicates the value of a certain item to the Beit haMikdash (Vayikra 27).

The parsha begins with a series of eleven pasukim that delineate the brachos (blessings) that will be showered upon Israel when the nation goes in the way of Hashem, keeps the mitzvos, and toils in Torah. These blessings include: the rain will fall in its time, the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will give forth fruit; the nation will eat to satiation and dwell securely in the land; there will be peace in the land and wild animals will cease from the land, and no sword will even pass through the land; the nation will chase its enemies and they will fall by sword; we will be fruitful and many, and Hashem will walk amongst us and be for us a G-d, and we will be His nation, and He will lead us with upright, strong and proud stature (Vayikra 26:3-13).

And then, the Torah warns us that if the nation does not go in the ways of Hashem, terrible disasters will befall us (Vayikra 26:14-46). The disasters are many, and they are painful. Our cities and land will lay desolate, we will fall before our enemies, we will be pushed into the cities

where plague will break out, there will not be sufficient food, the land will not yield its produce, our enemies will eat what we sow and grow, there will be panic, fever, and wasting away, we will flee before our enemies and even run from the sound of a rustling leaf, parents will consume the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters they will consume, G-d will not accept our offerings and our temple will be destroyed and laid waste, we will be scattered amongst the nations of the world and the sword will follow us, we will be lost amongst the nations and we will have no upright bearing in the lands of our enemies... and so on, and so forth.

These verses are amongst the most painful in the Torah (along with the klalos of Ki Savo, found in Sefer Devarim). Anyone aware of any epoch in Jewish history recognizes the klalos that have befallen us time and again. It is difficult for us to understand and comprehend, with our limited, mortal, finite vision, how such events can happen. There is no answer to how or why the exile is so long, so bitter, so painful and so dark. Hashem is Ha'tov Vi'ha'meitiv - the One Who is good and does good; yet in this world, the good is sometimes difficult to discern. We do not say it does not exist, for Hashem created the world only to do good to His creations; but at times, it is hidden from our eyes.

While it is true that the Torah tells us the klalos will

befall us when we reject the mitzvos and do not go in the ways of Hashem, Eichah tells us that the prophet, the nation, and our city of Yerushalayim cry out to the Heavens and weep and declare: *כִּי אִם מָאֵס מְאֹסְתֶנּוּ קִצְפֶּתָּ עָלֵינוּ עַד מָאֵד*, *For even if You have utterly rejected us, have You not raged sufficiently against us?* (Eichah 5:22).

In regard to Oct. 7, Gitty Beer, one of the United Hatzalah members who raced to the South on that date (at great and very real danger to their own lives, and who continued to work in the south in the days following Oct. 7) relates: “Near the entrance to Kfar Aza there is a gas station. Inside there is a convenience store whose shelves had been emptied by soldiers who took whatever there was on the shelves and left notes with their contact information so that they could pay the owners at a later date.

“When we pulled into the gas station on Tuesday afternoon (three days after the massacre), I saw an old man sitting near one of the outside tables and eating a yogurt. By this time, it was rare to see civilians in the area, and he was so out of place that he caught my eye. His clothing was shabby and tattered, and he had a very neglected appearance about him. He seemed to be about 80 years old.

“I approached him and asked gently, ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘I got hungry so I came to look for food,’ he replied. ‘Where did you come from?’ ‘I was in the safe room in my house in Kfar Aza.’ I was shocked. ‘But there is no one here anymore! Everyone was already taken from Kfar Aza!’ ‘I don’t know anything about that,’ he replied. ‘My wife and I came outside, and we didn’t see anyone, but I was hungry, so I went to look for food.’

“When I heard the old man’s words, my heart broke. The world had just come to an end in their village, and suddenly, these two old people just appeared out of nowhere, roaming around, with no idea of what had occurred. It was mind-boggling. I took the couple to an ambulance and gave them something to eat and drink, and we sent them to the hospital, where they would meet with a social worker who would take charge of their case” (Angels in Orange, The Shaar Press, p.116-117).

The pasuk tells us: *וְכָשְׁלוּ אִישׁ בְּאָחָיו כַּמְּפָנֵי חָרֶב וְרִדְף אֵין לְכֶם תְּקוּמָה לְפָנַי אֲבִיבְכֶם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה לָכֶם תְּקוּמָה לְפָנַי אֲבִיבְכֶם* - *Each man will trip over his brother, as if fleeing from the sword, but without anyone chasing after you; you will not be able to stand up against your enemies* (Vayikra 26:37). On the words: every man will trip over his brother, Rashi, quoting the Sages, teaches: Each man will stumble because of the sins of his brother, *שְׂכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֵבִין זֶה לְזֶה*, *for all of Israel are guarantors and are*

responsible for one another (ibid).

The fate of one Jew is the fate of another, and the destiny of our nation is the destiny of us all. Lest any one person think he can escape the story of Am Yisrael, the Torah tells us otherwise: you are all responsible for one another.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l, the Rav, teaches: “Our fate does not distinguish between aristocrats and common folk, between rich and poor, between a prince garbed in royal purple and a pauper begging from door to door, between a pietist and an assimilationist. Even though we speak a plethora of languages, even though we are inhabitants of different lands, even though we look different - one may be short and dark, the other tall and blond - even though we live in varying and unequal social and economic conditions - one may dwell in a magnificent palace and the other in a miserable hovel - we still share the same fate. If the Jew in the hovel is beaten, then the security of the Jew in the palace is endangered. ‘Do not imagine that you can escape to the king’s palace from the fate of all the Jews.’ (Esther 4:13). Both Queen Esther, garbed in royal apparel, and Mordechai the Jew, clad in sackcloth, were caught in the same web of historical circumstances. ‘Chaverim kol Yisrael, All Israel are knit together’ - we will all be pursued unto death or we will all be redeemed with an eternal salvation” (*Megillat Esther Masoret HaRav*, p.87).

In the aftermath of Oct. 7 and the terrifying and terrible events that have occurred in the eight months since, we can only daven that the verses of nechama (comfort) in our parsha shall come to fruition immediately and in our days.

וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאֶת בְּרִיתִי וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי - *and I will remember the covenant of Yaakov, and also the covenant of Yitzchak, and also the covenant of Avraham I will remember, and the Land I will remember* (Vayikra 26:42).

May the mercy of HKB”H be aroused (Tehillim 79:8), may our enemies fall before us and not vice versa (Vayikra 26:7-8), may the groan of the captives come before Him (Tehillim 79:11), and may HKB”H remember us while we are in the land of our enemies, never utterly rejecting us to annul the eternal covenant of Am Yisrael with our Merciful Father in heaven (Vayikra 26:44).

May we learn the lesson of collective responsibility (quoted above) and recognize finally that we have sufficient enemies without; and only our brothers are our friends within.

When we return unto each other with ahava and achva (love and brotherhood), and return unto Hashem with passion, love and desire for His Torah and mitzvos, perhaps

then the geula will come and we will merit the promise of: וּנְתַתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ וְשִׁכְבֶּתְם וְאִין מַחְרִיד *and I will put peace in the land, and you will lay down and fear no one* (Vayikra 26:6). For as Rashi comments on this verse: אִם אִין שְׁלוֹם אִין כְּלוּם, *if there is no peace, there is nothing ... כִּנְגִיד מִכָּאן שֶׁהַשְּׁלוֹם שָׁקוּל כְּנִגְדּוֹ הַכֹּל, from here we learn that the blessing of peace equals all other blessings* (ibid).

עַד מָה ה' תִּצְנַח תִּבְעַר כְּמוֹ אֵשׁ קִנְאָתְךָ - *Until when, Hashem, will Your wrath burn forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire?* (Tehillim 79:5);

הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָם - *return to us, Hashem, and we will return to You, restore our days as of old* (Eichah 5:21).

Rav Soloveitchik on Bechukotai: The Rav and the Land

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

An ominous verse in Parashat Bechukotai describes a time when the Jewish people will have estranged themselves from their faith and God. God says He will bring them to the land of their enemies to subdue them, but He will not abandon them. “I shall remember My covenant with Yaakov, and also My covenant with Yitzchak, and even My covenant with Avraham shall I remember. And I shall remember the land” (Leviticus 26:42). What role does the land play here?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik took this to mean that no matter how far a Jew strays from tradition and the legacy of the Patriarchs, the Land of Israel will remind him or her of their Jewishness. The mere presence of the Promised Land ensures that the Jew never fully forgets the covenant of old and remains cognizant of the difference between him and his non-Jewish neighbors.¹

A similar interpretation of this verse was offered by Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, a confidant and disciple of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, who lived at a time when the chalutzim were resettling the land. He wrote that the Jewish people might not have lived up to the measure of Yaakov, most perfect of the Patriarchs; nor did they emulate Yitzchak’s self-sacrifice; and perhaps they even were not faithful to Avraham’s compassion and charity. Still, so long as they continue to harbor the desire to return to the land and rebuild it from its ruins, it is enough for God to redeem them. The return to the land will truly catalyze the nation’s return to Torah observance.²

Hearing the Call

Song of Songs develops its allegory through the lover and the beloved. At one point, the woman says the words kol dodi dofeq, the voice of my beloved knocks (Song of Songs 5:2). The Midrash interprets this as a reference to the return to Zion spearheaded by Ezra and Nechemiah. There was a clarion call (kol) to build the Second Temple, which

unfortunately remained unheeded by the vast majority of the Jewish people.

It is no wonder, then, that the Rav chose these memorable words for the title of his unforgettable discourse concerning the State of Israel.³ On Yom Ha’atzmaut (Israel’s Independence Day) of 1956, only eight years after the establishment of the State of Israel, the Rav referenced this passage from Shir ha-Shirim. The lover knocks on his beloved’s door one night but she tells him she is too tired and he should come back the next day. When he fails to show, she searches in vain to find him. He is gone forever, she has missed her chance. With great drama and prophetic overtones, the Rav found the realization of this verse in recent history:

Eight years ago, in the midst of a night of the terrors of Majdanek, Treblinka, and Buchenwald; in a night of gas chambers and crematoria; in a night of total divine selfconcealment; in a night ruled by the devil of doubt and destruction who sought to sweep the Lover from her own tent into the Catholic Church; in a night of continuous searching for the Beloved — on that very night the Beloved appeared. The Almighty, who was hiding in His splendid sanctum, suddenly appeared and began to beckon at the tent of the Lover, who tossed and turned on her bed beset by convulsions and the agonies of hell. Because of the beating and knocking at the door of the mournful Lover, the State of Israel was born.⁴

Open the Door

The Rav enumerated six thunderous knocks on the door of the Jewish Diaspora, some which are nothing less than miraculous:

1. Politics: The first knock of the Beloved—God—was the recognition by both the West and the Soviet Union, already vying against each other for global supremacy, of the Jewish State’s legitimacy. The United Nations came into being solely to facilitate

that right and did so by recognizing the State of Israel in May 1948. A year later, Israel was accepted as a member of the United Nations.

2. The military: Following the establishment of the State of Israel, the second knock came on the battlefield, when the relatively small Israel Defense Forces defeated the much larger and far better equipped armies of five Arab countries.
3. Theology: The third knock was on the theological tent. Christian theologians had claimed that God deprived the Jewish people of its right to the land and that all the biblical promises referred concerning Zion and Jerusalem referred typologically to Christianity and the Church. The establishment of the state disproved that.
4. Assimilation: The fourth knock was on the heart of the perplexed and assimilated youth. God's concealment during the Holocaust resulted in great confusion, particularly among the young, and led to widespread assimilation. The State of Israel helped restore Jewish identity.
5. Self-defense: The fifth knock drove home the fact that for the first time in the history of our exile divine providence showed our enemies that Jewish blood is not free.
6. Refuge: The sixth knock resounded when the gates of the nascent state were opened, and Jews the world over knew they could seek refuge from hostile countries in Israel.

Beyond these knocks, there is another wondrous dimension to the return of the Jewish people to their land. A verse in Parashat Bechukotai makes a prophetic statement: "I shall make the land desolate, and your foes who inhabit it will be desolate" (Leviticus 26:32). This is a comfort of sorts: although the Jews will be exiled from their land, none of their conquerors or successors will ever prosper on it.⁵ Indeed, over the millennia of Jewish exile the land that once flowed with milk and honey remained desolate, a rocky, gloomy, and inhospitable land. Were it not for the fact that empires could not settle it for good, the Rav observed, the Jewish people would never have been able to make their stunning return and make the desert bloom.⁶

Not Answering the Door

The Rav called to his listeners, Orthodox Jews not typically involved in settling the land, to open the door and respond to this historical moment:

It is precisely Orthodox Jews, more than any other American

Jews, who bear the burden of guilt for the slow pace of conquest through taking possession. The obligation to pay close attention to "the voice of my Beloved" that knocketh and respond to Him immediately with mighty deeds and undertakings devolves precisely upon us who are faithful to traditional Judaism.⁷

Some religious Jews argued that settling the Land of Israel is not central to Judaism, because the Rambam does not enumerate it as one of the 613 commandments. The Rav was convinced that such people misunderstood the Rambam's entire project. The omission of this imperative from the list does not render it any less important. If that were the case, the Rambam's omission of the first commandment on the Rambam's list, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2), would deny its centrality to Judaism! It must be that the count of the mitzvot is about conceptually categorizing the Torah rather than making an exhaustive list of everything important in Judaism.⁸

In 1967, the Rav received a letter from Mrs. Miriam Shiloh, an Israeli Religious Zionist educator then teaching high school students at Givat Washington near Kibbutz Yavneh. As was common at the time, her students read Kol Dodi Dofek. At its conclusion, they asked her why the Rav himself had not made aliyah, and she, in turn, directed their query to the Rav himself. He responded in Hebrew:

I thank you for your words and accept your rebuke willingly. Indeed, I sinned against the Holy Land. I am amongst those who have fallen back (in not coming to the Holy Land). Of course, many factors that were out of my control prevented me. In spite of this, I am not searching for any excuse, nor am I justifying myself. I am guilty, and the blame rests on my shoulders.⁹

The Rav had very good reasons for staying in the United States. His candidness and readiness to scrutinize his decision, finding himself at fault, is both striking and inspiring.

Cautious Exuberance

Although the Rav's address weaves Scripture into the present with regard to the State of Israel, it falls short of understanding current events as prophetic and carrying eschatological meaning. The Rav elucidated his approach in this way:

There is a third halachic approach which is neither parallel to the position of those "whose eyes are shut" and reject [the significance of the State] nor the belief of those dreamers who adopt a completely positive stance to the point where they identify the State with the [fulfilment] of the highest goal of

our historical and meta-historical destiny. This third approach (which is the normative one in all areas), I would allow myself to guess, would be positively inclined toward the State, and would express gratitude for its establishment out of a sense of love and devotion, but would not attach excessive value to the point of its glorification and deification.¹⁰

Those “whose eyes are shut” are the Haredim, whom the Rav faults for refusing to acknowledge the miraculous nature of the State’s founding, denying its historical significance, and showing no interest in taking part in its development. The “dreamers” are followers of Rav Kook, who regard the State as possessing inherent spiritual value and assign it an overwhelmingly important role in the unfolding of Jewish destiny.¹¹

Rabbi Dovid Miller, the Rosh Kollel at the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem, and his wife once visited the Rav at his home in Boston. His wife asked the Rav about the long-held tradition, accepted by Briskers like the Rav, that the Jews will only be exiled twice. Does that mean that the Jews have returned to their land for good? The Rav took a moment to think and replied, “I am really not sure.”¹²

The Rav’s position was characteristically nuanced. On the one hand, the poetic and lofty rhetoric of Kol Dodi Dofek contextualized the wonders and the hand of God in contemporary Jewish history. On the other hand, he deeply believed that the State’s success depends not on divine miracles but on our own actions, sacrifice, and prayer.

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

The Rav offered the following insight about birkat hamazon (Grace after Meals) and our modern-day return to the land. In the second paragraph, we describe the land as “desirable” (chemdah), “good” (tovah), and “spacious” (rechavah). The latter two descriptions appear in the Torah (Exodus 3:8), while the first appears only in the Prophets

Our Intentions When Correcting and Criticizing update

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

ולא תונו איש את עמיתו ויראת מאלוקיך (25:18).

After introducing the prohibition of אונאת דברים, the Torah adds מאלוקיך – that we must fear Hashem. Rashi, based on the Gemara, explains that a special warning to have יראת שמיים is needed in the context of prohibitions which depend upon a person’s unexpressed intentions. In the case of אונאת דברים, a person can walk into a store and inquire about the

(Jeremiah 3:19). Why, then, did the Sages decide to put specifically that one first?

The Rav explained that “desirable” reflects the yearning of the Jews for their homeland. The attachment to the land is not rational and cannot be explained in logical terms. Moshe lived right near the Ark for forty years, yet he begged God to let him cross into the land. He felt something special, even if it could not be accounted for by reason.¹³ Similarly, the chalutzim faced great hardships and dangers building up the land, but they were determined to return, settle, and rebuild. The land for them was chemdah, a land that was yearned for even in the absence of religious motivations.

1. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks*, 150–151.
2. Mei Marom, *Nimukei Mikra’ot*, 163.
3. Gordon, “Note,” 86–89.
4. Kol Dodi Dofek, “Six Knocks.”
5. Rashi ad loc., quoting Sifra, 6:5.
6. Soloveitchik, *Fate and Destiny*, 37.
7. *Ibid.*, 36–37.
8. Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 178–180. Rabbi Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal proposed a different solution based on a teaching by Rabbi Yonah Dov Blumberg. The Rambam was simply being consistent. In the fourth prefatory principle to his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, he writes that he does not count a mitzvah that encompasses the entire Torah. The mitzvah of settling the land is precisely such a biblical, all-encompassing mitzvah (Teichtal, *Eim Habanim Semeichah*, 154).
9. *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, 227.
10. *Ibid.*, 163–164 (brackets and parentheses in the original).
11. Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 293.
12. Rabbi Dovid Miller, “High School Program: The Rav on Zionism and Medinat Yisrael,” <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/792514/rabbi-dovid-miller/high-school-program-the-rav-on-zionism-and-medinat-yisrael/> (accessed August 9, 2021).
13. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks*, 136–138. This also deflates the argument that one should not make aliyah since it can expose a person to religiously unsavory influences, whereas staying in an insular community in the Diaspora can prove more wholesome.

merchandise without any intention to buy, in violation of the prohibition of אונאת דברים, but he can falsely claim that he really was considering making a purchase. Nobody other than Hashem knows whether or not this person truly considered buying merchandise, and so observing this mitzva requires יראת שמיים. It is only if the person realizes that Hashem knows his unspoken thoughts and intentions that he will abide by this command, for otherwise, he will

violate this prohibition and claim that he had actually intended to buy a product.

Rav Shaul Alter, the Gerrer Rosh Yeshiva, notes an additional application of this concept to the prohibition of אונאת דברים. He tells the story related by Rav Shalom Schwadron, the “Maggid of Yerushalayim,” of the time when the chazan in a shul made a mistake. It was Shabbos Rosh Chodesh, when the standard text of תכנת שבת, which is normally recited in musaf on Shabbos, is replaced by the special text for Rosh Chodesh, אתה יצרת. The chazan mistakenly began reciting תכנת שבת, and so somebody in the shul banged on the table and shouted, אתה יצרת, to correct the chazan, who immediately transitioned to the proper text.

This incident, on the surface, appears perfectly normal and acceptable. However, few of the congregants knew that the fellow who banged on the table to correct the chazan had a personal vendetta against him. These two had a history, and there were hard feelings and lots of resentment between them. Undoubtedly, the fellow who banged experienced a degree of satisfaction by being able to correct the chazan, by having the opportunity to publicly point out his mistake. And this feeling of

satisfaction, the small amount of additional vigor with which he corrected the chazan, violated the command of אונאת דברים. If his intention was purely to correct the mistake, so that the tefila would be recited properly, then he would have done nothing wrong, and to the contrary, he would have been credited with a mitzva. But since he intended also to cause the chazan embarrassment, relishing the opportunity to point out his mistake, he is guilty of transgressing a Torah prohibition.

Rav Shaul Alter observes that this, too, is included in the admonition, ויראת מאלוקיך. Whenever we correct somebody, or offer criticism, the legitimacy of our words depends on our unspoken thoughts and intentions. If we are driven solely by a sincere desire to help the other person, then correcting or criticizing fulfills a mitzva. But if our motivation includes a desire to feel superior, to feel smarter or better than that individual, or to cause him to feel embarrassed, then we violate the prohibition of אונאת דברים. It requires a great deal of יראת שמיים, genuine fear of God, to know when to criticize and when to keep silent, whether we offer the criticism out of sincere motives or for the purpose of putting the other person down.

Achieving Peace and Security for the Jewish People

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Bechukotai, we encounter the first of the two תוכחות--tochachot, portions of the Torah in which G-d reproves the people of Israel for their transgressions. In both parashat Bechukotai, Leviticus 26:27-46, and parashat Kee Tavo, Deuteronomy 28:15-69, the evils that are predicted to befall the people of Israel for not following G-d's directives are terrifying. The only comforting aspect regarding both of these ominous portions is that they are each preceded by generous blessings that G-d will bestow upon the Jewish people for following His commandments.

Parashat Bechukotai opens with the most glorious blessings for rain and abundant harvest, for peace and tranquility, for material wealth and for the promise of G-d's presence to dwell among His people.

Given the seemingly perpetual state of embattlement of the people of Israel, the predictions of peace that are found in this parasha are particularly worthy of our attention. The Torah, in Leviticus 26:6, G-d promises: וְנָתַתִּי שְׁלוֹמִים וְבָאֲרָץ, וְשָׁכַבְתֶּם וְאִין מִמְּחִירֵי, that I [G-d] will provide peace in the land, and that My people will lie down with none

to frighten them. G-d will cause wild beasts to withdraw from the land, and the sword will not cross the land of Israel. The Jews will chase away their enemies, who will fall before them by the sword. In fact, five Israelites will chase away one hundred enemies, and one hundred Israelites will chase away ten thousand enemies.

Jewish history is often perceived, unfortunately, with great justification, as one unending series of tragedies, pogroms, expulsions, inquisitions, crusades, destructions, exiles and, ultimately, the holocaust. As we say each year at the Passover seder: דָּוָר דָּוָר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, In every single generation they [the enemies of Israel] rise up and try to destroy us. Our generation, that has experienced both the cataclysmic Holocaust and the exhilarating rise of the State of Israel, bears witness to the fact that there appears to be no rest for the weary. Today again, the State of Israel is besieged and beleaguered and subjected to constant vilification and condemnation, for the grave sin of attempting to provide basic security and protection for its citizens.

Are we, the Jewish people, destined to live this way

eternally? Is there no antidote or formula for achieving peace for our nation?

Thank G-d, there is a formula, and it is spelled out clearly in the first verse of this week's Torah portion. Leviticus 26:3 reads: **אם בְּחֻקֵי תִלְכוּ, וְאֵת מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ; וְאֶת אֲהָבָתִי אֶהְיֶה לָּכֶם...** If the Jewish people will follow G-d's decrees and observe G-d's commandments and perform them, then G-d will bless His people with all good, and will provide peace in the land.

If we look at the long and painful history of the Jewish people, we will clearly see that there has really never been a period of peace for our people without a concomitant return to G-d. Of course, political leaders must pursue all diplomatic means and efforts to achieve peace, but the true source of peace for the Jews is clearly the peoples' relationship with G-d.

In the time of the prophet Jeremiah (c. 650-c. 570 BCE), the evil came from the "North." Nebuchadnezer and his powerful Babylonian legions were threatening to wreak havoc upon the people of Judah. Looking for a means to defend themselves against this mighty force, the rulers of Judah sought to establish alliances with the Egyptians and the Assyrians. Jeremiah rails against these alliances, and cries out (Jeremiah 2:18): "And now, what have you to do on the road to Egypt, to drink the waters of Shichor (the Nile)? And, what have you to do on the way to Assyria, to drink the waters of the River (the Euphrates)?" Israel's salvation, says Jeremiah, lies only in the peoples' return to G-d. And, so, it is in our day as well.

I've often wondered why the Camp David peace agreement with Egypt, (September 1978), was concluded between Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin. After all, Menachem Begin was the hardline Revisionist

Zionist, who believed that even the East Bank of the Jordan belonged to Israel. Why wasn't peace concluded with Golda Meir or Levi Eshkol, who were far more conciliatory? I believe that it is directly attributable to the fact that Menachem Begin was the first Prime Minister since the founding of the State of Israel to utter those fateful words that "with the help of G-d we will achieve peace." Menachem Begin opened the door for G-d just a bit, inviting Him to play a role in achieving peace, and G-d responded generously.

More recently, it looked, for a while, as if peace with the Arabs was becoming more of a reality. The US embassy was moved to Jerusalem and Israeli sovereignty was recognized over the Golan Heights. Four Arab countries signed the Abraham Accords, and even Saudi Arabia was considering joining. It seemed as if the Messianic times were at hand!

But, then pernicious wanton hatred erupted between the citizens of Israel over judicial reform, resulting in massive, and, at times, violent street demonstrations. A group of secular Jews busted up the public Yom Kippur services in Tel Aviv. Only the brutal attack of October 7th stopped an almost-certain civil war. On the other hand, open miracles have occurred almost every day with the interception of over 14,000 murderous missiles launched at Israel since October 7th.

Let the diplomats continue to ply their diplomacy, let the negotiators continue to negotiate, but the real source of peace for our People is, and will be, based upon our peoples' relationship with the Al-mighty. If we Jews will only follow G-d's directives, and faithfully observe and perform G-d's commandments, then infinite blessing will be ours, and we will soon be able to lie down in peace, and none will disturb us.

You are not Worthless

Rabbi Johnny Solomon

Towards the end of Parshat Bechukotai, after the long list of chilling curses which we are told will be meted out to Bnei Yisrael if they disobey God's commands, God then instructs Moshe to, 'speak to Bnei Yisrael and say, "When a person makes a spoken vow to the Lord to give the equivalent of the value of a person ..."' (Vayikra 27:2).

As there is no obvious association between the curses that are listed in the parsha and these Arachin laws (i.e. the laws relating to making a vow of the value – Erech - of a person), Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak HaLevi Horowitz (1745-

1815), otherwise known as the 'Chozeh' of Lublin, asks why these two topics are juxtaposed with one another?

He answers that when a person focuses on the consequences and punishments which they may experience as a result of their failure to live up to what is expected of them, they may doubt themselves, their abilities, their meaning and their worth. In fact, some people may even conclude that they are worthless.

With this in mind, the Chozeh of Lublin explains that the laws of Arachin follow the curses which are listed in Parshat Bechukotai in order to teach us that even when God

is disappointed in us, and even when God threatens to punish us, we are still precious and valuable.

Interestingly, the biblical book with one of the highest number of citations of words containing the root *Erech* (value) is *Sefer Iyov*, the Book of Job (see 6:4, 13:18, 23:4, 28:13, 28:17, 28:19, 32:14, 33:5, 36:19, 37:19, 41:4). The question is: why is this the case?

I believe that the answer to this question is the same as that offered by the *Chozeh of Lublin* – namely that when we experience struggle, anguish and loss, this can lead us to doubt our meaning, our purpose, and our worth.

Accordingly, in those moments of doubt, and amidst

those confusing feelings which can lead a person to feel purposeless and worthless, the repeated reference to the concept of value and worth serves to remind us that we are precious, that life is valuable, and that there is more to us than what happens to us. As Viktor Frankl writes in his *Man's Search for Meaning*, while 'despair is suffering without meaning', 'if we can find something to live for - if we can find some meaning to put at the center of our lives - even the worst kind of suffering becomes bearable.'

And it is this idea which is captured in the concept of *Arachin* found at the end of *Parshat Bechukotai*, and in the word *Erech* which is repeatedly found throughout *Sefer Iyov*.

Challenge and Self Worth

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

In this week's parsha, following a brief overview of the blessings we will merit if we observe the mitzvot, the Torah describes what God has in store for the Jewish people should they diverge from the ways of the Torah. This litany of condemnations, known colloquially as the *tochaha*, or 'rebuke,' fills the first half of *Parshat Bechukotai*, spelling out the many forms of suffering that would be visited upon the Jews were they to turn away from God. Reading these verses may well leave some of us overwhelmed, fearful, and depressed – which is why in many communities they are traditionally read in an undertone. Yet the real puzzle of the parsha is what follows. With the *tochacha* finished, ostensibly finishing off *Sefer Vayikra*, the Torah shifts gears to discuss the mitzva of *Arachin*: when a person vows to donate to the *Beit Hamikdash* (Temple) the value of himself or another person. The Torah then presents a "price index" for how much one would owe, based on the age and gender of the person whose equivalent worth was dedicated. What does the mitzva of *Arachin*, a method for making monetary donations to the *Beit Hamikdash*, have to do with the *tochacha*? In what way are these two components of our parsha connected? A teaching attributed to the *Kotzker Rebbe* offers profound insight into this juxtaposition. Upon reading about, and all the more so, upon experiencing the horrors described in the passages of the *tochacha*, we may find ourselves calling into question our very worth as people. Of what value is the life of any person in the face of the possibility of remarkable failure in the eyes of God or immeasurable loss and suffering here on earth? As the inevitable depression strikes in the face of communal tragedy – much like what we experienced

in the wake of October 7th, – as well as when personal setbacks sets in, we may begin to ask ourselves: Are we worth anything at all? And it is here, at this very juncture, that the Torah instructs the Jewish people on the mitzva of *Arachin*, the commandment that declares in full voice that each and every one of us holds value. This section reaffirms how every person, created in the divine image, is worth something. Our intrinsic value, the *Kotzker Rebbe* teaches, can never be taken away, and must inspire us to pave a way forward – even in our most trying times.

This idea is highlighted in the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Buber ed. *Bechukotai* #6) in its interpretation of the verse from *Tehillim* (89:7), "For who in the heavens is comparable to God?" The term for "comparable", *yaaroch* (יערך), is read by our rabbis as a reference to *Arachin* (ערכין), in which we consecrate the worth of a person. It is God who turns to the angels, insisting that even for all their sanctity, their worship is less cherished by Him than that of humans on earth. For the Torah is designed for humans – beings who have parents and children, who hunger and thirst, who feel jealousy and anger. Beings who must sometimes fight lonely wars to root out evil; who have the capacity to lose their sense of self-worth, yet who also hold within their hearts the remarkable capacity to regain it. It is we, the humans who bring the offerings of *Arachin*, who insist upon our dignity, and are cherished by the Almighty, even in the face of incomprehensible tragedy and struggle. This is how we have survived so many calamities as a people and struggles as individuals. It is our intrinsic inner value that enables us to persevere, both as a community and as individuals.

Exile and Destiny

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

וְאִי גַם זֹאת בְּהִיּוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲיִבֵיהֶם לֹא מֵאֲסִתִּים וְלֹא גַעְלֹתִים
לְכַלְתֶּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם כִּי אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

But despite all this, while they will be in the land of their enemies, I will not have despised them or rejected them to annihilate them, to annul My covenant with them, for I am Hashem their God. (26:44)

This pasuk forms part of the concluding words of the section in this week's parsha known as the Tochachah, the Torah's warnings of retribution if the Jewish People do not remain faithful to the Torah and its mitzvos. If we look closely at this pasuk we will notice that of the four terms of retribution contained therein, the first two negate things that Hashem states He will not do: *לֹא מֵאֲסִתִּים וְלֹא גַעְלֹתִים*, *I will not have despised them or rejected them*, while the second two terms serve to negate specific outcomes or purposes, *לְכַלְתֶּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם*, *to annihilate them, to annul My covenant with them*. The implication is that these two things may indeed happen, but they will not happen for the reasons stated at the end of the pasuk.

What does this pasuk come to teach us about the experiences of the Jewish People in exile? If they do not occur for the reasons stated at the end of the pasuk, why do they occur?

The Cycle of Exile

The Meshech Chochmah explains. If we survey the history of our exile, we can perceive a pattern. The Jewish People arrive at a certain country as refugees, they band together and establish communities, developing themselves both in temporal and spiritual spheres. This leads them to a feeling that they fully belong to that host country, at which point winds of hostility begin to blow, erupting into a storm which forces them out of that country in search of safer shores. The upheaval of exile brings about a decline in terms of their physical, financial and political stability, as well as in spiritual stature, so that when they arrive at their new location they need to start from the beginning in all of these areas – whereupon the cycle begins anew. What is the meaning of this cycle and what goal does it serve?

Hashem has embedded in human nature the drive for each generation to advance newer ideas than the one which preceded it. In the temporal realm, this leads to advances in areas of technology, commerce etc. In the spiritual realm, the positive effects of this attitude are predominantly felt, and its value primarily realized, when the Jewish People are

in the land of Israel. There, the sanctity of the land enables Torah sages to join together, forming the Sanhedrin which acts with full authority to enact measures to develop and safeguard Torah living appropriate to that generation. Additionally, the spirit of prophecy and Divine inspiration which prevails in the Beis Hamikdash helps inform and guide any legislative innovation towards bringing the Jewish People closer to Hashem and to His Torah – not further away.

When the Jewish People are in exile, all of this changes. Without the abovementioned conditions in place, new enactments are no longer vouchsafed their positive value, and their positive effect is not assured. With this expression of “newness” essentially off-limits, each new generation will seek a different outlet through which to introduce ideas that did not exist in the previous one. When they first arrive in a country, spiritually and financially depleted, this creativity will have ample scope for positive expression, taking the form of establishing new communities and infrastructures, including religious ones.

However, once these institutions are in place, subsequent generations will seek to develop newer ideas still. This may then take the form of rejecting the existing notions and values of their parents and adopting what are for them “new” ideas – those of the surrounding culture. In rejecting their parents' ideas, they will forsake their own heritage and will seek to insinuate themselves into the host culture.

At this point, their very identity as a nation is in jeopardy. But Hashem's eternal covenant with His people and the exalted role with which He has endowed them in world history will not allow for their dissolution. Hence, at this stage, winds of exile being to blow, uprooting the Jewish people to yet more distant lands, where they begin again.

Of course, none of this needs to happen, and certainly not indefinitely. The Jewish people can merit redemption at any time and return to the setting where their creativity will be put to its most potent and positive effect. However, as long as they are in exile, this cycle will accompany them.

A New Road to a Familiar Place

The tragedy of these events repeating themselves is that the younger generation, in its infatuation with the prevailing host culture – which is “new” to them – lose sight of the

fact that such an attitude precipitated earlier exiles. They are sure that these “new” ideas are different. Addressing himself to the situation in his own time, the Meshech Chochmah comments:

The Jew forgets his roots and sees himself as a natural citizen [of the host population]. He forsakes the study of his own religion in order to study foreign languages... he thinks that Berlin is Jerusalem,¹ learning [moreover] from the corrupt among his neighbors, not even from the upright among them...

Then, a stormy and tempestuous wind will blow, uprooting him and placing him among a distant nation whose language he has not learned. There, he will know that he stranger, that his [true] language is our holy tongue, while other languages are of passing value for him. He will know that his roots are those of the People of Israel, his consolation lies in the comforting words of the prophets of Hashem, who prophesied concerning the scion of Yishai [the Mashiach] in the End of Days...

There [in his new land] he will find some respite, he will be aroused by a holy spirit and his children will add further vigor, disseminating in these new borders the Torah which had been forgotten... This is the way of the Jewish people from the day they began their wanderings.

The Mission Statement of Exile

Returning to our pasuk, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the Tochachah concludes by explaining the purpose of these experiences. The term מאסתיים, *despised them*, refers to the spiritual decline which accompanies the

upheaval of being exiled from one place to another, while the term געלתיים, *rejected them*, refers to the exile itself. This pasuk emphasizes that the goal and purpose of both these experiences is not לְכַלְתֶּם לְהַפִּיר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם, *to annihilate them, to annul My covenant with them*. Rather, the purpose is as stated in the concluding words of the pasuk, בְּיָאֵנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם, *because I am Hashem their God*. The covenant between the Jewish People and Hashem – as well as their historic mission representing Him in this world – are too important for them to be allowed simply to dissolve into surrounding cultures. Accordingly, the pasuk states that even in the most trying and turbulent episodes of our exile, the eye is on maintaining our unique connection with Hashem and moving us forward towards our ultimate destiny as His People.

1. These words are probably the most well-known and oft-quoted from the Meshech Chochmah, who passed away in 1927. Although the reference to “calling Berlin Jerusalem” assumed horrifying significance in the years that followed, Rav Copperman in his commentary nonetheless insists that it is wrong – and even misrepresentative – to refer to this section as “the Meshech Chochmah on the Holocaust.” To do so would serve to tie these comments exclusively to the Holocaust and hence be to miss his broader message which relates to the totality of the Jewish exile, both beforehand and afterwards. In the Meshech Chochmah’s time, the place which most vividly reflected this part of the exile cycle was Berlin. Had he lived in later years, he would have named other places, perhaps more familiar to us and closer to our own experience.

Haftarat Bechukotai: Bitachon: Surrender and Self Actualization

Rabbi Eliav Silverman (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarat, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

The choice of terminology we employ often reflects internal beliefs and assumptions. For example, I was recently studying Talmud with a student, and we came across a passage contrasting an ones bi-yedei adam, a disaster generated by human error or intention, versus an ones bi-yedei shamayim, a disaster that is a result of an act of God. The student was grappling with the correct translation of these terms, and I submitted that an ones bi-yedei shamayim should be translated, in colloquial English, as “a natural disaster.” The student looked a bit surprised by my suggestion, and asked why I had translated “shamayim,” literally meaning “the sky” or “heaven,” and figuratively referring to God, as “natural.” This short interchange highlighted for me the extent that I had internalized, at

least in my translation of this term, and quite possibly on a deeper level as well, certain assumptions and values that are prevalent in our society, despite the fact that I perceive them to be foreign to my religious convictions. In this case, my choice of translation of the term ones bi-yedei shamayim misattributed the calamity to “nature,” instead of linking it to a Divine act. A cursory analysis of some of the sources on this issue will quickly clarify that my translation is incongruous with standard Jewish thought.

The Rishonim debate the existence of the concept of “nature,” as we refer to it. The Ramban (Commentary on Shemot 13:16) claims that nature is merely a façade for God’s constant and ever-present miracles. Even the Rambam, who clearly believes in the laws of the natural

world, and in doing so limits, to a great degree, the concept of hashgachah peratit (see Moreh Nevukhim 3:17), writes explicitly in Hilkhos Ta'anit (1:2–3) that the proper Jewish response to tragedy is to contemplate the shortcoming of our actions. The Rambam claims that by doing this, we realize and recognize that calamities occur due to our own religious failings, and not due to chance or happenstance. As such, according to the Ramban, translating “ones bi-ydei shamayim” as a “natural disaster” is both textually inaccurate and theologically incorrect, because by attributing tragedy to coincidence, one absolves humanity from the responsibility to repent in response to tragedy.

Additionally, my translation of the term “ones bi-ydei shamayim” as a “natural disaster,” might be symptomatic of a general lack of bitachon, a concept discussed in the haftarah of Parashat Bechukotai. The appropriate response of religious individuals to tragedy must be linked to the Divine, and can't be attributed to chance or fate.

The haftarah of Parashat Bechukotai passionately describes the importance and significance of “bitachon,” loosely translated as “reliance on,” or “trust in,” God. The pesukim read: “Blessed is the man who trusts in Hashem, then Hashem will be his security. He will be like a tree planted near water, which spreads out its roots along a brook and does not see when heat comes, whose foliage is ever fresh; it will not worry in a year of drought and will not stop producing fruit” (Yirmiyahu 17:7–8). In contrast, the preceding pesukim describe the punishment, or possibly the harsh reality, of one who lacks bitachon. We read: “Thus said Hashem: Accursed is the man who trusts in people and makes flesh [and blood] his strength and turns his heart away from Hashem. He will be like a lone tree in the desert, and will not see when goodness comes; it dwells in parched lands in the wilderness, in a salty, uninhabited land” (ibid., 17:5–6).

It seems clear from these pesukim that bitachon is not just a mitzvah or a virtue, but is central to our religious experience. As such, I would have assumed that this concept would be given proper attention in our day schools and yeshivot and be a topic discussed from the pulpit in synagogues. Surprisingly, in my experience, it seems that little attention is placed on this vital and essential concept. I believe the reason for this partially stems from modern man's philosophical and emotional discomfort with bitachon. This discomfort makes it difficult for one to relate to bitachon, and therefore inhibits one from cultivating, developing and nurturing a genuine sense of bitachon.

A brief delineation of some of the many philosophical and emotional challenges that we have with bitachon, along with some antidotes, will hopefully serve to make bitachon more attractive to the modern Jew. Understanding the complexity of this concept can propel one to understand, internalize, and synthesize this pivotal trait into one's religious personality.

One challenge in relating to bitachon stems, in part, from the ambiguity regarding the proper definition of this concept. Some understand bitachon as a good luck charm that essentially grants individuals what they are hoping for. While it is true that there are sources that can be understood as supporting this understanding, the Chazon Ish, in his *Emunah U-Bitachon* (2:1), strongly rejects this, and claims that bitachon is the knowledge that all occurrences, regardless of their congruity with one's wants, are from God. This understanding rejects attributing occurrences to chance and happenstance.

This definition is one that is much easier for modern man to stomach. Although ostensibly it might be less comforting, ultimately, the knowledge that God has a grand plan and there is a method to what is sometimes perceived as madness, is a profoundly comforting thought. Adopting the Chazon Ish's definition of bitachon makes this concept more understandable and appealing.

Another impediment that exists in our quest for bitachon is rooted in our lack of emunah (faith in God), which is the basis and a precondition for bitachon. The medieval work, *Emunah U-Bitachon*, attributed by some to the Ramban, assumes a strong connection between belief in God, and trust in and reliance upon Him. At the beginning of the work, the author compares the relationship between emunah and bitachon to the relationship between a tree and its fruit. Just like a fruit can only grow on a tree that is healthy and strong, so too, genuine bitachon can only emanate from an individual who has strong emunah.

This correlation between emunah and bitachon underscores that fact that if we are to overcome our challenge with bitachon, we must begin with bolstering our emunah. We must ask ourselves if we are educating our children, our students, and ourselves, to have an emunah that is worthy of generating genuine bitachon. If our emunah isn't palpable and pulsating, and our quest for a serious relationship with God isn't at the forefront of our educational agenda, how can we hope to educate towards bitachon? If bitachon stems from emunah, we must cultivate and bolster our emunah in order to develop our

bitachon.

Another obstacle that we must overcome, if we are to synthesize bitachon into our worldview, is its relationship with our obligation to be engaged in hishtadlut (due-diligence). We are called upon to be proactive in our self-actualization, but the inherent danger that lies in our obligation to roll up our sleeves and sacrifice our blood, sweat, and tears to achieve our goals, is that we can easily be led to believe that it is solely our effort, sophistication, and superiority that is responsible for our success. Our involvement with hishtadlut often leaves little emotional and spiritual space for bitachon.

The pesukim in Devarim (8:12–18) warn against this phenomenon, as it says: “Lest you eat and be satisfied, and you build good houses and settle, and your cattle and sheep and goats increase, and you increase silver and gold for yourselves, and everything that you have will increase – and your heart will become haughty and you will forget Hashem, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery, Who leads you through the great and awesome Wilderness... And you may say in your heart, ‘My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth!’ Then you shall remember Hashem, your God: that it was He who gave you strength to make wealth....”. The pesukim warn against the potential pitfalls associated with misattributing the source of our successes, and remind us of the need to remember God as the source of our successes.

One antidote to this potential problem is the concept of constant God-awareness. The Rambam in the Moreh Nevukhim (3:51), which is codified by the Rema at the beginning of Orach Chaim (1:1), highlights this point by claiming that God-awareness serves as a constant reminder of one’s duties and obligations. Internalization and practice of God-awareness allows one to ensure that one’s obligation to be involved in hishtadlut does not lead to the misattribution of success to one’s own efforts. This God-awareness provides the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional space for bitachon to blossom.

Thus far I have attempted to pinpoint some of the impediments that exist in applying and internalizing of the concept of bitachon, but I haven’t yet reached the root of the problem. The concept of bitachon assumes that people should trust in, and rely on, God, but most people want to feel that they, and not God, are in control.

Historically, until relatively recently, humanity was in a much more vulnerable state, exposed to, and to a large degree defenseless to, the harsh elements of the natural

world. In this state, the awareness of the need to have bitachon in God was more intuitive and natural. The technological advances of the last century have contributed to drastic changes in life expectancy and to improvements in the quality of life. This extremely positive phenomenon relieves modern man, on some level, of the need to trust in, and rely upon, God. As a wise person once said, “If there are no atheists in foxholes, then it’s hard to find a boteach in a metropolis.”

One antidote to this quandary can be gleaned from the Ramban that we quoted above, which denies the existence of what we refer to as “nature.” The Ramban claims that one can prove this point by contemplating the miracles described in the Torah. All will agree that miracles are acts of God, and these miracles highlight and reveal the fact that even that which we perceive as “natural” is indeed miraculous, albeit a “hidden miracle.” Using Ramban’s logic, it is clear that despite our many technological and medical advances that give us a sense of safety and security, we are not truly in control. The sad reality of earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and untreatable illnesses, serve as a constant reminder that when all is said and done, God alone is in control. This realization, if fully internalized, can propel individuals to surrender their false sense of independence and motivate them, even in the modern era, to live with a true sense of bitachon.

Additionally, our difficulty with the concept of bitachon stems in part from our emotional need to feel in control. For some, this need is rooted in anxiety disorders that are pacified only with a perceived feeling of total control, and for others, this feeling comes from the positive ideals of self-actualization and self-sufficiency. Regardless of the roots, these emotions can cause people to believe that they indeed are totally independent and in control, and are therefore, by definition, not in need of God.

While it is obvious to all that no one person is totally independent (after all, most of us don’t milk our own cows or drill our own oil), capitalist society has allowed us to retain our feelings of independence, by asserting that we remain independent because we exchange our hard earned money for goods and services. For this reason, one generally doesn’t feel a great sense of gratitude to the farmer who milks the cows; since, after all, this service is provided as part of a business relationship that doesn’t create any personal obligations and has no strings attached.

In contrast, true reliance on God comes with a heavy price: a commitment to the entire system of Halakhah. Bitachon is part of a dynamic relationship with God, and

that relationship obligates man to study and observe the Torah. This reality should be seen as an opportunity to grow closer to God, and actualize the very purpose of our existence (see Ramban, *ibid.*). Unfortunately, the “strings attached” to bitachon, namely a deep relationship with God, is sometimes perceived as a liability, especially when parts of Torah and mitzvot run contrary to present popular ideologies and norms. If we are successful in changing our attitude towards Torah and mitzvot, and indeed, perceive our obligations as opportunities to develop and intensify our relationship with God, we will be able to experience genuine bitachon. This bitachon leads one to true self-actualization by strengthening one’s relationship with God.

Another useful tool that can be employed to enhance our sense of bitachon is tefillah (prayer). If bitachon is an outgrowth of our emunah, as the sefer *Emunah U-Bitachon* (the one attributed to the Ramban) contends, then it seems logical that tefillah, which is one of the main ways in which we communicate with God, plays a central role in cultivating our faith and trust in God. It is noteworthy that the Ramban in his commentary to the Rambam’s *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* (*Mitzvat Asei 5*) suggests that if there is a Biblical commandment to pray, it is limited to prayer in times of distress. During these times, one is more aware of one’s reliance on God, and therefore it follows that the obligation to engage in tefillah, which expresses our relationship with God and our reliance upon Him, is greater.

R. Yosef Dov Ha-Levi Soloveitchik suggested that the Rambam (*ibid.*), who claims that there is a Biblical commandment to pray every day, fundamentally agrees with the Ramban that the Biblical obligation to pray is limited to prayer in times of distress. According to R. Soloveitchik, the Rambam is of opinion that given the fragility of the human condition, one is constantly in a state of distress. This interpretation, regardless of its merit in explaining the Rambam’s opinion, serves as inspirational testimony to our constant reliance on God, thus underscoring the fundamentals of bitachon.

We began with the observation that language often reflects internal assumptions and truths. It’s interesting that in Modern Hebrew, the Minister of Defense is called the “Sar Ha-Bitachon,” and a security system is referred to as a “ma’arekhet bitachon.” This terminology might reflect the fact that sadly, to a large degree, the concept of reliance on God has been superseded by reliance on security forces or on modern technology. Given the centrality of bitachon, as emphasized in the haftarah of Parashat Bechukotai, it would behoove us to take a step back and contemplate the

degree to which we are boteach in God, and invest the time and spiritual energy necessary to cultivate and nurture genuine feelings of bitachon.