Infinite games are participative. When it focuses on exam results and qualifications, or it can be an infinite game when it becomes not the pursuit of power but a form of service and good in the eyes of the Lord… (Deut. 6:17-18) The problem here is that the first verse seems to cover all 613 of the Torah’s mitzvot. They are commandments, decrees or laws. Why then does the Torah add, “Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord”? Surely doing what is right and good is no more and no less than keeping God’s commands, decrees and laws. Are these not two ways of saying the same thing? However, as the Talmud[3] explains: “And you shall do that which is right and good in the eyes of the Lord” means that one should not perform an action that is not right and good, even if they are legally entitled to do so. This is the basis of an important law in Judaism, dina debar metzra, “the law of bar metzra departs from the law of bar meitzra.” The law of bar metzra departs from the law of bar meitzra in that it applies to the right to buy land to the neighbour who then reimburses the owner of the adjacent land has the right to buy it. This is th

Beethoven was not seeking popularity when he wrote his late sonatas and quartets. James Joyce was not aiming at a bestseller when he wrote Ulysses.

Infinite games are not a means to an end: winning the championship, beating the market, victory in an election. Instead they are what psychologists call autotelic, that is, they contain their purpose within themselves. We do them because the activity is inherently creative, demanding, uplifting and ennobling.

It should be clear by now that these are not simply two types of game. They are two different ways of playing a game. If, in any country at any time, politics is treated as a finite game in which all that matters are popularity ratings and election results, then it quickly becomes superficial, trivial, uninspiring. The quality of leadership declines. The public becomes cynical and disillusioned. Trust is eroded and the social bond becomes frayed. When politics is lifted by a sense of history and destiny on the part its leaders, when it becomes not the pursuit of power but a form of service-to-others and social responsibility, when it is driven by high ideals and ethical aspiration, then leadership becomes statesmanship and politics itself a noble calling. This is not to denigrate finite games. We need them, because in many spheres of life we need rules, boundaries and time limits. But we must also have space for infinite games because they are among the highest expressions of the human spirit.

These reflections are prompted by two verses in today’s parsha: Be sure to keep the commandments, decrees, and laws that the Lord your God has enjoined upon you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord… (Deut. 6:17-18) The problem here is that the first verse seems to cover all 613 of the Torah’s mitzvot. They are commandments, decrees or laws. Why then does the Torah add, “Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord”? Surely doing what is right and good is no more and no less than keeping God’s commands, decrees and laws. Are these not two ways of saying the same thing? However, as the Talmud[3] explains: “And you shall do that which is right and good in the eyes of the Lord” means that one should not perform an action that is not right and good, even if they are legally entitled to do so. This is the basis of an important law in Judaism, dina debar metzra, “the law of the adjoining property.” When a landowner comes to sell a tract of land, the owner of the adjacent land has the right to buy it. If it is sold to someone else, the buyer must return the land to the neighbour who then reimburses them for the price they paid for it.

This law is not about land ownership as such. In general, a landowner has the right to sell to whomever they choose. It is about doing “the right and the good” – what people sometimes call menschlichkeit. To the neighbour, the purchase of the land is an immense good. They can expand without dissipating their landholdings in different locations. To the outsider, losing this purchase is not a significant loss because they can acquire other fields elsewhere. The law of bar meitzra deports from the usual principles of law in order to achieve a moral end: helping one’s neighbour. Rashi, basing himself on this Talmudic passage, says that doing the right and good in the eyes of the Lord means “compromise, acting beyond the strict demands of the law.”[4] Ramban agrees with this but goes on to make a fascinating and fundamental point:

And the intention of this is that from the beginning God said to keep God’s commandments, testimonies, and laws as God has commanded them. And now, it says: even regarding what God did not command, pay attention to do what is good and right in God’s eyes, because God loves goodness and righteousness. This is important because it is impossible to mention in the Torah all the details of people’s behaviour with neighbours and friends, or business conduct or local ordinances. The Torah mentions many such laws, such as: “Do not gossip”, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge”, “You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbour”, “You shall not insult the deaf”, “You shall rise before the aged”, and so on. Now it states

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from: Rabbi Sacks <info@rabbisacks.org>
date: Jul 29, 2020, 12:37 PM
subject: The Infinite Game (Va’etchanan 5780)

The Infinite Game (Va’etchanan 5780)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The popular author and TED lecturer Simon Sinek recently published a book entitled The Infinite Game.[1] Based on the distinction first articulated by James P. Carse,[2] it is about the difference between two types of enterprise. One, a finite game, has a starting and ending point. It obeys rules, recognises boundaries, and has winners and losers. Most sports are like this. So, often, is politics: there are campaigns, elections, rules and regulations, successful and defeated candidates. Businesses can be run this way, when they focus on quarterly profits, share price, market share and the like. But there are also infinite games. These have no starting point or finishing line, no clear winners and losers, no agreed rules or boundaries. Art is like this. So are music and literature. Beethoven didn’t win. Bach didn’t lose. Great artists change the rules. That is what Beethoven, Schoenberg and Stravinsky did; so too did Van Gogh, Cézanne and Picasso. Politics can be like this when it rises above opinion polls and sets its vision on larger issues of justice, equality and the moral health of society. Education is a finite game when it focuses on exam results and qualifications, or it can be an infinite game when it is about breadth and depth of understanding and character development.

Finite games are played to win. Infinite games are played for their own sake. Finite games are usually performed in front of an audience of some kind. Infinite games are participative. We engage in them because we are changed by them. Van Gogh did not need to sell paintings to regard art as worthwhile. Beethoven was not seeking popularity when he wrote his late sonatas and quartets. James Joyce was not aiming at a bestseller when he wrote Ulysses.

Infinite games are not a means to an end: winning the championship, beating the market, victory in an election. Instead they are what psychologists call autotelic, that is, they contain their purpose within themselves. We do them because the activity is inherently creative, demanding, uplifting and ennobling.

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generally that one should do what is good and right regarding everything, including compromise and acting beyond the strict demands of the law.[5] Ramban seems to be concurring with Rashi, but actually he is making a somewhat different point. Rashi is saying: keep the law and go beyond it. Ramban is saying that there are some things that cannot be specified by law: “because it is impossible to mention in the Torah all the details of people’s behaviour.” The Torah gives us specific examples: don’t gossip, don’t take revenge and so on. But the rest depends on the situation, the circumstances, and the person or people you are dealing with.

In the terms we encountered at the beginning of this essay: not all the Torah is a finite game. Much of it is. There are rules, commands, decrees and laws. There is the halachah. There are boundaries: milk, meat, public domain, private domain. There are beginnings and endings: the earliest time to say the morning Shema and the latest time. There are successes and defeats: either one does or doesn’t complete the counting of the Omer. All of this is finite even though it is dedicated to the One-who-is-Infinite.

Ramban’s point however (made also by the Maggid Mishne[6]) is that there are significant areas of the moral life that cannot be reduced to rules. That is because rules deal in generalities, and human lives are particular. We are all different. So is every situation in which we find ourselves. Good people know when to speak, when to be silent, when to praise, when to challenge. They hear the unspoken word, sense the concealed pain, focus on the other person rather than on themselves, and are guided by a deeply internalised moral sense that leads them instinctively away from anything less than the right and the good. The “right and the good in the sight of the Lord” is about the part of the moral life that is an infinite game.

There is a fine account of such a person in Psalm 15: “One whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart… who does no wrong to a neighbour, and casts no slur on others;… who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind… Whoever does these things will never be shaken.” I believe that we make a fundamental error when we think that all we need to know and keep are the rules governing interactions between us and our fellows. The rules are essential but also incomplete. We need to develop a conscience that does not know when to speak, when to be silent, when to praise, when to challenge. It was 1975, and the RCA membership convened on our campus to hear the Rav. That readiness of the young students to gloss over the Rav’s concern, but that readiness carried no weight.

The clock was never of consequence. That was the same clock that may well explain the readiness of the young students to gloss over the Rav’s concern, but that readiness carried no weight.

At first glance, we may find this experience inconsistent with another vignette frozen in my mind, as it was the first time I merited to hear the Rav. It was 1975, and the RCA membership convened on our campus to hear the Rav reflect:

“… the study of Torah is an act of surrender. That is why Chazal stress so many times the importance of humility, and that the proud person can never be a great scholar, only the humble person. Why is humility necessary? Because the study of Torah means meeting the Almighty, and if a finite being meets the infinite, the Almighty, the Maker of the world, of course this meeting must precipitate a mood of humility, and humility results in surrender. What do we surrender to the Almighty? We surrender two things: first, we surrender to the Almighty the everyday logic, or what I call mercantile logic the logic of the businessman or the utilitarian person, and we embrace another logic — the logic m’Sinai. Second, we surrender the everyday will, which is very utilitarian and superficial, and we embrace another will — the will m’Sinai.” [http://arikahn.blogspot.com/2013/03/rabbi-soloveitchik-talmudtorah-and.html]

The obvious deliberateness with which the Rav chose the word “surrender” portrayed submission, with the attendant rejection of attractive and meaningful intellectual alternatives. To be charged by the author of The Lonely Man of Faith, who conceived of “majestic man,” to surrender all of that divinely gifted majesty, became an enduring lesson in yiras Shamayim and the immutable truths of Torah. Throughout the years, we would watch the Rav bring his powerful intellect to the fore to elaborate with unmatched clarity and from that elevated peak, humbly surrender to the requirements of halacha and mesorah. On the one hand, we are enjoined to use the keenest powers of human intellect to uncover G-d’s truths. On the other hand, we are expected to submit that same intellect to truths revealed. Indeed, it is that ultimate acquiescence that validates and animates our tireless pursuit to comprehend the will of Hashem, in all its depth and complexity.

Thus, the Rav explained, the importance of the Rambam’s statement: The section containing Sh’ma Yisrael is read first because it contains the uniqueness of G-d, love for Him and study of His Torah, which is the main principle that everything is dependent on. Rambam, Hilchos Kerias Sh’ma 1:2 Why does the Rambam include the study of Torah as part of the mitzvah of krias Sh’ma? The Rav explained that sparing no effort in the pursuit of an accurate interpretation is an act of kabbalas ol malchus Shamayim — acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. To do so knowing that we will embrace the truths of Torah, irrespective of the discomfort or sacrifice or countercultural position that they may impose, is an expression of the “ol,” the yoke of kabbalas of malchus Shamayim.
The concept of Toras Emes appears in the berachos that are recited during Kerias HaTorah, but after, not before reading that parsha of the Torah. Why is that? The public reading of the Torah was never the opportunity to engage in the rigor of Torah study. Therefore, it is not introduced with la’asok b’divrei Torah, to toil in the words of Torah, but rather with our grateful recognition of the singular chosenness expressed through matan Torah. Nevertheless, as we step away from the public presentation of a parsha, we recognize that we embrace that parsha without compromise or apology, and hence recite v’naschan lanu Torah emes, He gave us a Torah of Truth. The mindful pursuit of Toras Emes that lies ahead is as vital as it is daunting. All indications are that the minds of the future will be shaped or conditioned by a culture that has little patience for true curiosity or for the rigors of painstaking deliberation. All indications are that the hearts of the future will judge only by the unanchored standards of their prevailing culture. The bais hamedrash of Toras Emes will challenge all of that and continue to nurture the robust tzlem Elokim, image of G-d, with all of its magnificent discussion, noisy debate and silent reflection. The bais hamedrash of Toras Emes will test many millennials as it demands to be the center around which all else will be valued without apology or concession. It may well be that the excitement of inquiry and the utter joy of discovery will only be found in that bais hamedrash. It is certainly the only address for experiences, which genuinely resonate with the Jewish soul.

Rebuilding is a process, and it is never accomplished in an instantaneous and easy manner. There are many ups and downs that rebuilding will engender, disappointments, frustrations and even reversals. It will take much more time for the effort to comfort the Jewish people in its continuing effort to rebuild itself anew in its ancient homeland currently. The Jewish world was almost destroyed in a few years in the past century. It will take time to rebuild it. It is a continuing process along a very bumpy road. We should be comforted realizing that the process has begun and is underway. There are many weeks and years ahead of us, as we continue our quest to be comforted. But we are already blessed with the knowledge that we have reached the season of comfort and consolation.

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
from: Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein <info@jewishdestiny.com>
reply-to: info@jewishdestiny.com
subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein
Weekly Parsha VA’ETCHANAN
Rabbi Wein’s Weekly Blog
The Shabbat immediately after the sad fast day of 9 Av is called Shabbat Nachamu – the Shabbat of comfort and consolation. This Shabbat draws its name from the first two words of the prophet Yeshayahu, and this series of prophetic readings continues for seven weeks with a message of hope and contentment.

The prophetic readings leading up to the ninth of Av were only three in number, but the message of consolation is more than twice that in number. The prophet himself notes that the comforting message will be granted in a double manner (Nachamu Nachamu), and we receive seven weeks of comfort to counterbalance the three-week messages of doom and destruction. We are all aware that there are many varied and valid reasons and motives for Jewish customs and traditions. All of these customs regarding the readings of these specific Haftorot and the reasons for them should not be treated lightly, and one should not dismiss them in a cavalier fashion simply because it may no longer seem to be appropriate to the situation. Human life and behavior are too complex to attribute it to just one motive and reason. This is true regarding all details and aspects of Jewish tradition as well. There are ample examples in past and present Jewish society, how the abandonment of certain customs that modernists felt to be anachronistic eventually led to violations of explicit Torah commandments and values themselves. Judaism should never be observed and viewed in a simplistic, superficial manner. It is too grand for such treatment.

There is a profound and important lesson to be derived from the fact that the prophecies of destruction required only three weeks of public reading while the prophecies of hope and consolation mandated a seven-week period of time on the Jewish calendar. Destruction requires far less time and effort to achieve its sad and nefarious goal. When the end comes, it does so with inevitably and swiftness. Great empires and powerful countries can exist for centuries but are consigned into the dustbin of history in only a few decades or even a few years. It is so much faster and easier to slide down than to attempt to rise and rebuild and struggle forward.
Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, in his masterful work Faith after the Holocaust, cites a bold and startling passage of the Talmud (B.T. Yoma 69b) which sheds light on this issue:

“Said R. Yehoshua ben Levi (a survivor of the Second Temple devastation): Why was our Judicial synod called the “Men of the Great Assembly”? Because they restored the (Divine) crown to its pristine glory.

Moses came and countered, ‘the great, powerful and awesome God’ (Deut. 10)

Jeremiah came and declared, ‘The Gentiles have undermined the infrastructure of His Temple; where is His awesomeness?’ And he (Jeremiah) deleted (the word) awesome (from God’s praises in the Amidah).

Daniel came and cried out, ‘The Gentiles are subjugating His children; where is His power?’ And he (Daniel) deleted (the word) powerful (from God’s praises in the Amidah).

They (the Men of the Great Assembly, who formulated our prayers) came and restored, saying, ‘The very opposite is the truth! Herein lies the power behind God’s power: that He conquers His instinct (to set evil off at the pass before it wreaks its damage) and has patience for the wicked (to wait for them to repent and repair the world). And herein lies His awesomeness: were it not for the awesomeness of the Holy One Blessed be He, how could one (paltry) nation withstand and survive the (powerful) nation’s roundabout.”

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s message is indubitably clear. God has created an imperfect world of freedom of choice, a seemingly absurd and lawless world in which individuals will do even that which the Almighty would not want them to do (the Kabbalistic notion of tzimtzum, the willful contraction of the goodness and justice of the Creator of the Universe, as it were, in order to leave room for a world of free choice). As the prophet Isaiah (45:7) declares, “Creator of light and Maker of darkness, Doer of peace and Maker of evil (sic), I am the Lord, the Doer of all these things.” God has confidence – and even guarantees – that even that which the wicked do, will repent, that human beings will eventually succeed in repairing and perfecting this world in the Kingship of the Divine, that there will eventually be a messianic period of world peace and well-being (Isaiah 2, Micah 4, Zechariah 7-9). Hence God allows the world to proceed in accordance “with its customary way,” without preventing stolen seed from taking root in the ground, or withering the hand uplifted to smite an innocent human. Hence, “there is no reward for commandments in this world;” only in the other, eternal world of souls and spirituality will there be share rewards for deeds well done (B.T. Kidushin 39).

Israel plays a pivotal role in this drama. We are God’s “holy nation and priest-teachers” to the world (S’forno, ad loc), the descendants of Abraham who chose God before God chose him (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah Laws of Idolatry 1, 1-3), guaranteed by God of eternal progeny who would eventually live in the Land of Israel and teach ethical monotheism to the entire world (Genesis 12:1-3).

Those who opposed ethical monotheism, relying on might rather than right, brute violent power rather than love and morality, have all too often ruled the world – from Pharaoh the totalitarian despot of Egypt, to Nazi Hitler to radical Wahabi Islam. The very survival of Israel, our miraculous ability to remain alive despite Egyptian enslavement and holocaust conflagration with horrific exiles and persecutions in between, regardless of the fact that we are the most paltry in number and the weakest in power of all nations of the world (indeed, for almost 2000 years we were completely stateless and armyless), – makes us God’s witnesses, adat HaShem, testifying that God is indeed a God of love and morality, a God of right over might, a God of morality over brute force.

This is God’s power, this is God’s awesomeness, and this is the source of our great comfort: God chose you since you are the smallest (weakest) of all nations, because God loves you” – not because you are perfect but because you are morally better than your enemies, and because your very survival testifies to the existence and eventual triumph of a God of Justice, morality and peace.

Shabbat Shalom!

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
from: Rabbi Chanan Morrison <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>
to: rav-kook-list@googlegroups.com
subject: [Rav Kook Torah]

VaEtchanan: Mezuzah and Eretz Yisrael

Rav Kook Torah

The Torah commands us to affix mezuzot to the doors of our houses. This mitzvah would not seem to have any particular connection to the Land of Israel. After all, the obligation applies equally anywhere in the world. Under certain conditions, even a boat on the high seas must have mezuzot!

The Talmud in Menachot 44a, however, does make a distinction when performing this mitzvah in or outside the Land of Israel. While homeowners are obligated to affix mezuzot as soon as they move in, renters may wait thirty days. Yet this grace period of thirty days only applies outside the Land.

Why is that?

The Talmud writes that a person renting a home in the Land must immediately put up a mezuzah because of yishuv Eretz Yisrael, the mitzvah to settle the Land of Israel.

Yishuv Eretz Yisrael

According to Rashi, the Sages wished to encourage people to live in the Land. If a person spends money on mezuzot - and the obligation to install mezuzot falls on the renter, not the owner - then he will be less likely to leave his residence in Israel. The renter has already put money in the apartment, and usually one is not allowed to remove mezuzot upon vacating the premises. Additionally, even if the renter does leave, the apartment will be more attractive to other Jewish renters, as it is already outfitted with mezuzot.

Rav Kook had trouble accepting this explanation. Are mezuzot so expensive that this will determine where someone will choose to live? Tosafot suggested that, on a Biblical level, only homeowners are obligated to affix mezuzot. As the verse says, “Write them on the doorposts of your houses and gates” (Deut. 6:9). The rabbis extended the obligation to renters, on condition that they live in the house for more than thirty days. Why thirty days?

Rabbeinu Manoach (cited by Beit Yosef, YD 286) wrote that only a true “dweller” is obligated to affix mezuzot. Until thirty days, the renter is still considered a “temporary dweller” - a traveler who may decide to leave for another location - and is exempt from observing the mitzvah.

But renting in the Land of Israel is different. A person fulfills the positive mitzvah of yishuv Eretz Yisrael with any type of dwelling in the Land - even renting. As the verse says, “בְּבֵית יִשְׂעֵיתָם” (Num. 33:53). Rav Kook reasoned that since renting is deemed ‘dwelling’ in terms of the mitzvah of yishuv Eretz Yisrael, it is also considered ‘dwelling’ for the mitzvah of mezuzah.

Children of Zion

Rav Kook called attention to this Halakhic ruling - that Jews living in Eretz Yisrael immediately acquire full residency - to the British High Commissioner.

Despite Britain’s promises to establish a national home for the Jewish people, the British government imposed strict limits on Jewish immigration. The authorities were deporting illegal immigrants, and Rav Kook requested that the deportations be halted.

The High Commissioner was surprised. “I know that you respect law and order,” he noted. “After all, the Talmud teaches dina d’malkhuta dina — one must obey the law of the land. These people have violated the law by entering the country illegally. How can you argue in their favor?”
“The law refers to new immigrants,” Rav Kook replied. “But these people are not new immigrants; they are returning citizens.

“Our Sages explained that a Jew who was born in Zion, as well as one who looks forward to seeing her, are both considered to be children of Zion. Rav Huna said owh nostrp a sdrow retho n.l. a57 tobusKe) born outside the country, yet yearns to see Zion and Jerusalem — he or she is also a child of Zion.

“Spurred by great yearnings for Zion, these new arrivals took great risks and traveled by circuitous routes to come here. As the rabbis wrote, these Jews are ‘children of Zion.’ They are not new immigrants, but returning citizens!” Rav Kook concluded warmly, “Our country should receive them with open arms, like an overjoyed mother welcoming home children who return, after long years spent wandering in distant lands.”

Who is Greater – Vilna Gaon or Chatam Sofer
Q: Who was greater – the Vilna Gaon or the Chatam Sofer?
A: Both were among the greatest of our Rabbis in Halachah, in holiness and in purity (The Admor Imrei Sofer of Erlau once related that a grandson of the Vilna Gaon asked his father, the Yad Sofer [a grandson of the Chatam Sofer], who was greater – the Vilna Gaon or the Chatam Sofer? The Yad Sofer did not want to answer, and place his head between the two great mountains which where these Rabbis. The questioner did not give up and would keep asking from time to time. One time the Yad Sofer finally “broke” and gave an answer. On that very day, the Yad Sofer was walking in the street and was struck by a bike and broke his hand. The Yad Sofer saw his injury as a punishment for his brazenness in commenting on the greatness of these two towering figures. Someone later asked the Imrei Sofer: Did you ever ask your father what he answered? He responded in surprise: After he told me what happened to him because he expressed his opinion about it, would I dare to ask him this question?! In the book “Be-Mechitzat Zekeini”, pp. 216-217).

Running to Shul
Q: It is a Mitzvah to run to Shul, but it looks weird!
A: One should run in a normal manner and not cause a Chilul Hashem (Piskei Teshuvot 90:18). By the way, one should also run to the Beit Midrash and to any Mitzvah.

Ask Rav Aviner: toratrabavin@yahoo.com
Ha-Rav answers hundreds of text message questions a day. Here’s a sample:

Leaving Torah Class to Use the Restroom
Q: Ha-Rav published in a text message in the name of Prof. Nechama Leibowitz that one should not leave a Torah class in the middle to use the restroom. But isn’t it forbidden to “hold it in”?
A: Yes, it is an explicit Gemara in Yevamot (64b) that the students of Rav Huna did not use the restroom in the middle of a Torah class and their health was negatively affected. And see Terumat Ha-Deshen (#16). But this is not our case. Rav Huna’s classes were extremely long, while ours are relatively short, and one can use the restroom before and after the class. Furthermore, when I served in Tzahal, I sat in ambush for 10 hours and did not use the restroom. I planned ahead and did not drink much water beforehand.

Messiah without Knowing
Q: Can a person be the Mashiah without knowing that he is the Mashiah?
A: No. See Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 11:4 for the list of criteria to know if someone is the Mashiah.

Tefillin during Musaf
Q: I accidentally Davened Musaf of Rosh Chodesh with Tefillin. Did I fulfill my obligation?
A: Certainly. This is not a negative but a positive. It seems that in the past, when they wore Tefillin all day long, they did not remove them during Musaf on Rosh Chodesh. In our days, Yemenite Jews wear them during Musaf on Rosh Chodesh.

Recording from the Radio
Q: If there is a Torah class on the radio, is it permissible to record it for myself?
A: Yes. It seems that the Rabbi and the radio station would allow it as long as it is not for commerce or public use.

Tefillin on Person in Coma
Q: Is it permissible to put Tefillin on a person who is in a coma?
A: There is no obligation, but it is permissible. Perhaps he will feel it.

Bringing Ketubah on Vacation
Q: When a family goes on vacation, does the wife have to bring her Ketubah with her, since she should have it available at all times?
A: No, since there is a fear that it will be lost (The Satmar Rebbe answered in the same way, and added that it is better to leave it at home in a safe place, and to always know its exact location. In the book “Nitzotzei Tomer” volume 1, p. 453).
await salvation? Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom and understand one matter from another?

The Reishit Chochma, quoting from Mesechet Chibut Hakever, says that in addition to these questions, a person is asked, “Did you crown Hashem as King over you, morning and evening?” Meaning, did you say the Shema morning and evening. And, “Did you crown your fellow over you by giving him/her pleasure (nachat ruach)?”

“Now, O Yisrael, listen to the decrees and to the ordinances that I teach you to perform…”

And so is it when the Torah speaks of decrees and ordinances. Just as the questions in masechet Shabbat are of the essence, so too, “I was created to serve others and no one was created to serve me” is an essential duty — and not a level of saintliness.

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fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
from: Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald <ezbuchwald@njop.org>
subject: Weekly Torah Message From Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald
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Rabbi Buchwald’s Weekly Torah Message
“The Mandate for Parental Involvement in Jewish Education”
(updated and revised from Va’etchanan 5761-2001)

In this week’s parasha, parashat Va’etchanan, we encounter two fundamental declarations of the Jewish faith: the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6-18), and the Shema prayer (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), “Hear O Israel, the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is one.”

The first paragraph of the Shema prayer begins with the words: אֲדֹנֵינוּ אֱלֹקֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר נָתַנְנוּ אֶת־הַשֵּׁם אֶלֶּה לְבָנֶּהָ. This verse calls on every Jew to love G-d with all one’s heart, all one’s soul and all one’s might.

The Sh’mah prayer continues: וְשִׁנַנְתָם לְבָנֶיךָ, וְדִבַרְת בָן. שִׁנַּה בַדֶּרֶךְ, וּבְשָׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמֶךָ. These words which I command you today shall be upon your heart, וְשִׁנַּה בַדֶּרֶךְ, וּבְשָׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמֶךָ. and you shall teach them to your children, and you shall speak to them diligently, שִׁנַּה בַדֶּרֶךְ, וּבְשָׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמֶךָ. when you sit in your home, and when you go on your way, when you lie down and when you rise up.

Let us focus on the phrase, שִׁנַּה בַדֶּרֶךְ, שִׁנַּה בַדֶּרֶךְ, which serves as the Torah’s mandate requiring Jews to educate their children. (It is fascinating that there is no direct Mitzvah in the Torah for a Jew to study Torah, other than studying Torah in order to be able to teach one’s children!)

Of all the 613 mitzvot of the Torah, perhaps the most vital for the continuity and continuation of the Jewish people is the mitzvah of שִׁנַּה בַדֶּרֶךְ, שִׁנַּה בַדֶּרֶךְ, and you shall teach your children. Jewish education is the lifeline and the lifeblood of Jewish life. After all, it is Jewish education that has proven, throughout Jewish history, to be the most effective method of educating large numbers of people, over long periods of time, to ethical and moral living.

Furthermore, more than 3300 years of Jewish history confirm that there is absolutely no chance of Jews surviving as Jews for the next generation, without our people’s intense and passionate commitment to Jewish education.

An analysis of the words שִׁנַּה בַדֶּרֶךְ, שִׁנַּה בַדֶּרֶךְ reveals a host of profound insights. The root of the word שִׁמְשָן, שִׁמְשָן, can be traced to the word שִׁמְשָׂן, which, like the Hebrew word שִׁמְשָן, שִׁמְשָן, means to repeat, over and over, implying that Jewish learning and rituals must become habitual and constant in a Jew’s life, and become ingrained into the very essence of the Jew. This statement underscores, that for continuity, real continuity, there needs to be a sincere commitment to the practices and rituals of Jewish life.

An alternate root of the word שִׁמְשָן may be the root-word שִׁמְשָן, שִׁמְשָן, which means sharp. Jewish education must be intense, sharp, meaningful, exciting, and cutting edge.

But, perhaps most of all, the verse boldly declares: רְשׁוֹם בְּתִינוֹתֶם, you shall teach your children! Most parents today pass off their children’s education to professionals—professional teachers, tutors, schools, yeshivot, day schools. With this verse, the Torah underscores that the fundamental, bottom line, obligation of the parent is שִׁמְשָן שִׁמְשָן, שִׁמְשָן, you shall teach your children. Even though parents may rely on professional teachers, the buck ultimately stops with the parent. In fact, the Hebrew term for parent, אבָּיָה–“horeh,” is derived from the Hebrew word שִׁמְשָן–“moreh”–to teach. A parent is a teacher—the primary teacher!

Consequently, if a school fails to properly educate, the school is not at fault, the parent is at fault. If the teacher fails to teach properly, the responsibility lies with the parent, not the teacher. It is the parent’s responsibility to be on top of the educational services provided by the school, to be well informed about the effectiveness of their children’s teachers, and to correct the “miseducation” that often takes place in school settings. While it is certainly true that children spend many hours in formal educational settings, the “quality time” spent at home with parents is of far greater value in terms of “real” education.

The Midrash Rabbah has a fascinating comment on Genesis 27:22, that recalls the story of Jacob deceiving his father to receive the blessing. All the idolaters gathered about Avnemus of Gadara (a first century non Jewish philosopher) and asked him: Can we defeat the nation of Israel in battle? Avnemus replied: Go out and make the rounds of all their synagogues and houses of study. If you find children in them, chirping away (while studying Torah) you will be unable to defeat them. For this is what their father [Issac promised them (Genesis 27:22): “The voice is the voice of Jacob”–as long as the voice of Jacob is found in the synagogues (and houses of study), the hands will not be the hands of Esau.

But if not, “The hands are the hands of Esau,” and you will be able to defeat them.

There’s no such thing as overdosing on Jewish education. There’s no such thing as being too passionate or too extreme concerning the value and importance of Jewish education. I have often said regarding the challenges of raising Jewishly-committed children in today’s environment, that if parents aspire for their children to be “passionate” about Judaism—due to the blandishments and distractions of secular society, they will be fortunate to wind up with moderate children. If parents aim for their children to be moderate about their Judaism, they’ll wind up with moderate children. If parents aim for their children to be passionate about their Judaism, they’ll wind up with passionate children.

There is no such thing as “real” education. “Real” education is a story of Jacob deceiving his father to receive the blessing. “Real” education is the story of Jacob deceiving his father to receive the blessing. There’s no such thing as “real” education. “Real” education is a story of Jacob deceiving his father to receive the blessing. There’s no such thing as “real” education. “Real” education is a story of Jacob deceiving his father to receive the blessing. However, “real” education is “quality time” spent at home with parents. In fact, the Hebrew term for parent, אבָּיָה–“horeh,” is derived from the Hebrew word שִׁמְשָן–“moreh”–to teach. A parent is a teacher—the primary teacher!

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For those who are not fortunate enough to be in a position to send their children to an intensive Jewish educational setting, which is absolutely basic today, keep in mind the Torah’s admonition: לְכָשֵׁר לְכָסָר. Take, ten, fifteen minutes, out of your busy schedule, twice or three times a week, to discuss Jewish issues and Torah issues with your children. With the abundance of classes available today, both online and in actual class settings, there is simply no excuse not to participate. “Do as I say,” is not nearly as powerful as “Do as I do.”

The Shabbat after Tisha b’Av is traditionally known as Shabbat Nachamu, in deference to the first of a series of seven Haftarot (prophetic messages) of destruction of both the Jerusalem Temples, starts on Wednesday night, July 29th and continues through Thursday night, July 30, 2020. Have a meaningful fast.
This year, the joyous festival of Tu b’Av, the fifteenth of Av, is celebrated on Tuesday night and Wednesday, August 4th and 5th, 2020. Happy Tu b’Av. May you be blessed.

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
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subject: Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Shema Yisrael Torah Network
Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Va’eschanan

Hashem said to me, “It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter.” (3:26)

The Midrash Tanchuma (Va’eschanan 4) relates that Moshe Rabbeinu said to Hashem, “Ribbon HaOlamim, You referred to me as Moshe, My servant (Bamidbar 12:7). I truly am Your servant. You also wrote in Your Torah (Shemos 21:5) that the eved l’vi, Hebrew bondsman who refuses to leave servitude after the prescribed six years goes through a process and avado l’olam, he remains in servitude until Yovel. Thus, Hashem, I ask to be allowed to remain in my position as an eved and continue serving You.”

Hashem replied, “Rav lach, it is too much for you. It has already been decreed that you are to die.” The Rambam (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 10:4) writes that when a Navi, prophet, prophesizes a punishment (i.e. an event such as death, hunger or war), even if it does not come to pass, it is no indication that the prophet is not truthful. Hashem is merciful and the person (people) might have repented, so Hashem may have absolved him (them). If the Navi promised that something good would occur, however, and it does not materialize, he is deemed to be a Navi sheker, false prophet. Anything good that emanates from Hashem, any decree for good which Hashem decrees (which is what the Navi claimed would happen) must occur.

Otherwise, the Navi is a false prophet.

The Brisker Rav, zl, applies the Rambam to explain Moshe’s appeal to Hashem to allow him to live and lead the nation into Eretz Yisrael. The Almighty had the power to change His decree from bad/destruction to good, thus permitting him to enter the Land. Hashem responded that, in theory, Moshe was correct. He had told him, however, to refrain from speaking to/leading the nation, because Yehoshua’s “turn” had come. Part of the gezera, decree against Moshe, was that he would no longer lead the nation, and that the reins of leadership would hence be transferred over to Yehoshua, his trusted student. The gezera thus includes “good” (Yehoshua’s leadership). This cannot be rescinded. The “good” must materialize, even at the expense of Moshe’s continued life.

We see from here that it is not always as we see it through our eyes of flesh and blood. Indeed, Hashem renders all decisions precisely because His sweeping vision sees everything at once. Avraham Avinu died five years earlier than Yitzchak Avinu, so that he would not be witness to his grandson, Eisav, going off the derech, leaving the path, and becoming the paradigm of evil that he become. Now, let us imagine that Yitzchak and Rivkah Imenu, who waited twenty years for their twins, would have been blessed with progeny right after the wedding. This is why I say, Baruch Hashem, the Almighty makes the decisions. What we do not know is for our own good.

See, I have taught you decrees and ordinances, as Hashem, my G-d, has commanded me. (4:5)

Chazal derive an interesting halachah from this pasuk. Moshe Rabbeinu enjoins the nation to observe his manner of teaching the law to the nation. Just as he performed his mission gratis, likewise, when a Jew teaches Torah to his fellow Jew, he should not do so for remuneration. Does that mean that the thousands of rebbeim, moros, roshei yeshivah, rabbanim, roshei kollot, menahalim, anybody who teaches and disseminates Torah, should relinquish payment? Does this indicate that their profession is a “non-profession”? You get what you pay for. The salary one commands indicates the significance and value of the position. If one does not command much of a salary – or worse, does it for nothing – is this an indication that the endeavor in which he is engaged is of little consequence and even less significance? Clearly not. In Yalkut Meam Loez, Horay Yaakov Cali, zl, offers the following analogy to illuminate us concerning the incalculable value of Torah. A man was very close with the ruler of a small country. The ruler was a brilliant man who kept to himself, disinterested in becoming involved in the everyday strife and petty issues that plague other rulers. This ruler had his close circle of friends of which this man was one. He had enormous wealth; thus, he was satisfied to rule over his small country in a benevolent manner.
One day, the friend paid a visit to the ruler. He gave his friend an in-depth tour of the country and the palace. The two friends feasted together and had a great time enjoying one another’s company. As a parting gift acknowledging their abiding relationship, the king gave his friend a sword. In those days, a sheathed sword was part of one’s apparel, his daily uniform. The king’s sword was comparable to his scepter; no one could ever wear it. This sword was made completely of the finest, purest gold, its hilt inlaid with diamonds and precious jewels. The material value of this sword was beyond a “king’s ransom.” This is the extent to which the king valued his relationship with his friend.

Effusive with expressions of gratitude, the friend bid the king farewell as he began his journey home. All went well, as the king presented his friend with the sword and returned to the palace. All the king’s ministers stood in awe, observing the beauty of the sword. One of the ministers, himself a wealthy man, was envious of the friend who had received this impressive gift. He, too, wanted such a sword to call his own. He went to an artisan and commissioned an exact replica of the king’s sword for his personal use. Once he received it in his hands, he was a new person, his envy ameliorated.

Weeks passed, and the minister took a trip outside the country’s borders. When he came to the border, he was asked if he had anything to declare. He proudly displayed his sword, for which they assessed a heavy tax. The minister was beside himself with anger. “How dare you charge me taxes on my sword?” he complained. “Did you collect a similar tax a few weeks ago when the other person (the king’s friend) with a similar sword passed through?” They replied that they had not. “Why is his sword any different than mine?” he railed at them.

“This is the sword that belonged to the king. Apart from its material value of gold and precious stones, it is part and parcel of the king’s uniform, part of his honor and glory. We are unable to appraise such a sword. It is priceless! To place a premium on the sword would, by extension, impugn the honor of the king. What belongs to the king is above and beyond estimable value. We cannot say the same for your sword.”

For those who have toiled in the vineyard of Torah, who have dedicated themselves and their families to a life of excellence in Torah, both in learning and dissemination, the value of Torah has never been a question. One cannot possibly place a price on Torah. To study it is our obligation: to teach and disseminate it is our privilege. How can anyone put a price on the prime entity that connects us with the Creator? A Torah educator receives remuneration for the time he expends during which he could have engaged in learning and dissemination, the value of Torah has never been a question.

We now understand why this verse has such overriding significance. It is our way of confirming that everything that Hashem does is inherently good – even if at the moment of our declaration it does not appear that way. As Yaakov Avina was about to descend to Mitzrayim, Egypt, he was filled with a sense of trepidation. At that point, Hashem appeared to him and comforted him, saying, “I shall descend with you to Egypt and I shall surely bring you up, and Yosef shall place his hand on your eyes” (Bereisshit 46:3,4). Concerning the last words, “Yosef yoshis yado al einecha, the Zohar HaKadosh says, Da raza d’krias Shema,” “This is the secret of Krias Shema.” The Kol Aryeh explains that since Krias Shema expresses the achdus, unity, of Hashem, and Elokeina, expresses His Mercy and Judgment, it is a concept that is often difficult to accept. In moments of serious turmoil, when one is going through a frightening, painful experience, believing that what he is seeing is an act of Justice, it is best that he cover his eyes and not look. Just believe. Our model is Yosef HaiTzaddik who experienced one tzarah, adversity, another after another. In the end, Hashem demonstrated that it all fit together to produce a happy ending.

Everyone has his/her own personal Shema Yisrael story in which what appeared to be adverse actually acted as the segue to comfort and joy; similar to the Chelei Moshiaich, the birth pangs of Moshiaich. We are living in a time – the last century – that has witnessed the greatest cruelty and pain that the Jewish Nation has experienced from time immemorial. Even today, I write this dvar Torah as I am sitting isolated in my house, due to the raging virus that is decimating innocent people. We wonder why. We ask when it will all end? We understand that these are the birth pangs of Moshiaich, but what does that mean?

The following “story” related by Horav Yisrael Chortkov zl, to a delegation of Jews, chassidim from Germany, who turned to him for a message of hope and reassurance, as the Nazis were beginning their reign of terror, illuminates this concept: “There were once two powerful kings who fought and conquered the entire world until each dominated half of the world. Veritably, they each would have continued fighting against one another, but each always harbored a fear of defeat that deterred them from launching an offensive. One day, one of the kings had a son: the other had a daughter. Let the two royals marry, and the child born to them would one day rule the world.

“Great idea, once the couple would have a child. Unfortunately, the dreams of the two prospective grandfathers did not materialize, since the young couple remained childless. The finest doctors were summoned to find a cure to whatever was preventing the couple from producing an heir or heiress to the throne. Finally, one brilliant doctor promised a cure, but he identified one danger: the potential mother might die to the complications that were likely to arise in the course of the pregnancy.

“Understanding that their child was the whole point of the marriage, the couple acquiesced to the risk. The princess conceived and, during the course of the pregnancy, the doctor was called a number of times when a crisis arose. He succeeded each time in preventing a tragedy from occurring. Once the princess entered her ninth month, her pains increased in earnest, until they became almost unbearable. Panicking, she called for the doctor, ‘You must do something,’ she cried in agony. ‘Anything, as I cannot take this pain any longer!’ This time the doctor said, ‘I am terribly sorry, I am unable to help alleviate the pain. These pains are different than your previous ones. These pains are the real thing, the pangs of childbirth. The only panacea to your pain will be the birth of your child. You must suffer these pains if you want to give birth to your child.’”

The Rebbe looked at the delegation and sighed, “Do you understand the message? These are the birth pangs of Moshiaich. They will subside when he arrives. May Hashem protect those who survive.”

Shema Yisrael connects us as a people. Jews estranged from Torah and mitzvos know that the Shema is our clarion call of unity. In one of the secular kibbutzim (Shomer Ha Tzair), one of the girls “rebelled” against her family and somehow became a baalas teshuva and returned to her religious

Hear, O’ Yisrael: Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the One and Only. (6:4)

Judaism’s seminal verse, the pasuk that accompanies us as we end our sojourn in this world is: Shema Yisrael: Hashem Elokeina, Hashem Echod; “Hear, O’ Yisrael, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One.” The Tur Orach Chaim 61 rules that one places his hand over his eyes when he recites the Shema. What is the significance of Shema, and why does one cover his eyes upon reciting it? In his preface, the Kol Arayeh observes that two of Hashem’s Sheimos, Names, are seemingly contrary to one another. The name Elokieinu/Elokeina is the Name that represents the Almighty’s, middah, attribute, of Din, Strict Judgment. The Name ‘Hashem’, on the other hand, represents Rachamim, the middah of Mercy. To the casual observer, mercy and strict judgment are incompatible with one another. If this is the case, when we say Hashem Elokeina, Hashem is our G-d, we seem to be making a statement that is, at best, ambiguous.

This is specifically what we are underscoring when we say Shema Yisrael: Hashem/Mercy and Elokieinu/Din are one and the same. True, at times Hashem appears to us as acting with mercy and, at times, He comes across as manifesting judgment, but we believe that everything – both what appears to be merciful and what appears to be harsh judgment – all emanates from the Name ‘Hashem,’ which represents Mercy.
it could be afternoon: the sun appears to be shining, then it begins to get daylight, the sun is shining, and everything seems to be going his way. Last, is down. Or, he could be experiencing a mazel of circumstances.

Schwab, zl and favors that He provides for all of us all morning and afternoon.

Your miracles and favors) that are with us every season, evening, ושבכל עת ערב ובקר וצהרים it to others.

subject matter, it is difficult to demonstrate that transmission as important to him that it is engraved in his heart and not simply be superficial, then your words will be able to penetrate in your heart and not simply be superficial, then your words will be able to penetrate in the hearts of your children/students." The Sefer HaYashar (Rabbi Zerachyah or Rabbeina Tam), expresses a similar thought, “Anything that emanates from the heart will enter into the heart (of the listener).” Whatever the mouth simply expresses will not get past the ear. In other words, only one who accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah, who makes it a part of himself, can effectively transmit that Torah to others.

Horav Shraga Grossbard, zl, taught that a mechanech, Torah educator, must be prepared to give everything up for the sake of his students’ learning. Furthermore, each talmid, student, must know this. He should feel that his rebbe is his rebbe, not just when life is good, when he is doing well, but even when he is under extreme pressure, when the learning does not come easily, when there are issues at home, both material and spiritual. A student should feel that he is uppermost in his rebbe’s mind. The student can only sense this when the rebbe as a person and as an educator manifests this attitude. One might suggest that this occurs when the rebbe cares about his vocation; thus, his student is paramount in his mind. According to the Alshich, it might be the other way around. It is because the Torah is so important to him that it is engrained on his heart, that he views its transmission as being of the greatest consequence. If one does not love the subject matter, it is difficult to demonstrate the proper passion in transmitting it to others.

Va’ani Tefillah

For Your miracles and favors that are with us every season, evening, morning and afternoon.

At first glance, this tefillah, prayer, thanks Hashem for the many miracles and favors that He provides for all of us all the time. For this, we express our gratitude thrice daily in the accompanying prayer. Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, takes it a step further, offering an alternative practical and insightful meaning. Erev, boker and tzaharaim refer to the moods or circumstances in which one finds himself. One may be in an emotional state of erev, evening, darkness, melancholy. It could be caused by age, lack of mezel, poor health, family issues; it is always something and, as a result, he is down. Or, he could be experiencing the exact opposite. Life is great: it is daytime, the sun is shining, and everything seems to be going his way. Last, it could be afternoon: the sun appears to be shining, then it begins to get cloudy, and the sun begins to set. Darkness is setting in and beginning to overwhelm the sunshine. We thank Hashem for guiding us through these periods/circumstances. We might become depressed in darkness, naughtily in sunshine, and filled with ambiguity as the sun begins to set and the sunshine is waning. Nonetheless, we know that Hashem is always present. For this, we express our gratitude.
someone who recites this psalm three times every day. This is why we recite Ashrei, which includes this Chapter of Tehillim, three times a day, twice in Shacharis and once during Mincha. Yosel did not want to sidetrack the conversation with this information.

Hashem Provides for All, even those without Wherewithal.

“What is unique about this Psalm that its recital merits such a special reward?” Ron inquired.

“The Gemara explains that this Psalm includes the verse beginning with the words Posayach es yodecha, which praises G-d Who opens His hands to provide for all creatures. One must make sure to recite this verse with much focus (Tur, Orach Chayim 51), as we thereby internalize the fact that Hashem supervises all his creatures and provides all their needs.

“In addition, the alphabetical acrostic of this Psalm demonstrates that King David intended that it be easily memorized and utilized by all of mankind (Rav Hirsch, Tehillim 25:1).

“The verses of this chapter that follow Posayach es yodecha, also include many basic tenets of Judaism. They note that Hashem’s deeds are justified; and that He is close to all who seek him truthfully, fulfills their desires, and protects them. It is critical to recite these passages with full focus on their significance. One who recites the verse Posayach es yodecha without thinking about its meaning is required to read it again, since he has missed the message of the passage. Some authorities conclude that if he completed the Psalm, he should repeat from the words Posayach es yodecha to the end of the Psalm (Mishnah Berurah 51:16).”

Begin the Day with G-d’s Praise, so that we Merit the Sun’s Rays
Ron replied: “This is really a nice, meaningful passage, and it certainly sets the tone for devotion and interacting with G-d, which is one of the beauties of Judaism. However, according to my references, this is only one Psalm among several others that we read.”

Yosel continues his explanation: “True. In another Talmudic passage, the great scholar, Rabbi Yosi, mentions his yearning to receive the special reward granted to those who recite the Psukei Dezimra daily (Shabbos 118b). Also, reciting these praises with the proper awareness guarantees that our subsequent prayer will be accepted (Abudraham).

“The early authorities dispute how many Psalms Rabbi Yosi included in his Psukei Dezimra. While Rashi mentions only Psalm 148 and Psalm 150 (presumably in addition to 145), the Rabam includes all of the last six Psalms of Tehillim as the kernel of Psukei Dezimra. Accepted halachah follows the Rabam (Tur, Orach Chayim 51), and therefore we recite all six Psalms, but in extenuating circumstances we follow Rashi’s opinion. For example, someone with insufficient time to recite the entire Psukei Dezimra with the tremendous focus it deserves and still be ready to begin the Shmoneh Esrei together with the congregation may omit the three extra Psalms that the Rabam includes and rely on Rashi’s opinion. We actually rule that one may delete even more sections of Psukei Dezimra to enable one to begin the Shmoneh Esrei together with the congregation.”

Together we shall Pray, and then look Forward to a Wonderful Day!

“Why is it so important to begin the prayer together with everyone else?”

“Unfortunately, but realistically, we sometimes do not focus when we recite our prayers. In reality, prayers recited without proper thought should accomplish nothing and may even be harmful. Imagine someone who has the opportunity for an audience with a human king and arrives late, out of breath, and distracted. If his conversation is unfocused, he will probably be thrown into a dungeon for his disrespect! How much more so when talking to the King of kings!”

“When our prayers fall short of what they should be, we deserve to have them rejected. There is one consolation, however. When a community prays together, G-d always accepts their prayers (Berachos 8a).”

Concentrate on Ashrei, and we will Focus while we Pray
“I now understand why Ashrei is an important prayer,” said Ron. “But I see in my Siddur that besides Psalm 145, that the Ashrei prayer also includes three other verses from Psalms, two before Psalm 145 and one after.”

“I see you’ve been paying a lot of attention to the prayers.”

“The Siddur I use notes the Biblical source of every prayer, so it does not really involve a lot of paying attention. Praying the way you are describing does require a lot of concentration. But I am eager to try. After all, for many years G-d meant little in my life – now that I understand how important He is to me, I am trying to pray daily, with meaning. I truly enjoy these six Psalms, because each one emphasizes a different aspect of G-d’s magnanimity. But, could you explain why we begin with the verse Ashrei, which is ‘borrowed’ from elsewhere in the book?”

“The Halachah recommends spending some time in quiet meditation, prior to praying (Berachos 30b). This makes it easier to focus on the essence of prayer and what we are trying to accomplish. The source cited for this law is the verse Ashrei, usually translated as ‘Happy is he who dwells in Your house; he will continually be able to praise You.’ I would note that Rabbi Hirsch, a great nineteenth century scholar, explains the word Ashrei a bit differently. According to his explanation, the verse means: ‘He who dwells in Your house is constantly striving forward in his life; providing his life with more meaning.’ Either interpretation emphasizes the importance of not racing into our prayer, but spending time meditating over the smallness of man and the greatness of G-d, before we approach Him with our daily requests.”

Piskei Dezimra Every Day and one’s Concerns will go away.

“My own experience is that engaging oneself in Pesukei Dezimra not only helps one daven the entire tefilah on a completely different level, but also rouses one’s sense of bitachon. In David Hamelech’s own words “The G-d of Yisroel told me… the righteous will rule over man; he will prevail through his fear of Hashem” (Shmuel II 23:3).

“In modern Hebrew, bitachon means security or defense; but bituach means insurance. Both of these uses cloud the issue: Yisrael Betach BaHashem, the Jewish people can trust only in Hashem. Only through arousing our sense of Hashem’s power and providence can we possibly find any comfort. In the words of the Chovos HaLeVavos, ‘He who does not trust in Hashem, places his trust in something else.’”

“I certainly identify with this, perhaps more so, since I am so familiar with the way people live ‘out there.’ I find these Psalms extremely powerful.”

Baruch She’amar – A Song of Desire
Ron is ready with his next question: “I notice that while the Pesukei Dezimra contains only Biblical quotes, my Siddur notes no Biblical quotes in the introductory passage.”

“Because these passages are so important and comprise their own special miztvah of praising G-d, we introduce and conclude with special blessings, just as we recite blessings before and after eating, and before performing mitzvos. The introductory prayer, which begins with the words Baruch She’amar, begins by blessing G-d ‘who said and made,’ a quality unique to Hashem. He both says and performs, whereas all else in the world either orders or acts (Avudraham). Baruch She’amar includes hints to all of Creation, by alluding to the Ten Statements with which Hashem made the world. To quote the Tur (Orach Chayim 51): ‘One must recite Baruch She’amar with song and sweetness, because it is a beautiful and desirous song.’

The concluding blessing of Pesukei Dezimra begins with the word Yishtabach. In order to avoid any interruption between these berachos, one may not interrupt from the time one recites Baruch She’amar until the end of davening (Shulchan Aruch 51:4). The Medrash reports that when the verse speaks of someone ‘who is afraid because he has sinned’, it refers to a person who spoke during Pesukei Dezimra.”

Singing David’s Song will keep us from Steering Wrong
Ron notes that while Baruch She’amar states that we use the songs of David, Your servant, to praise Hashem, not all the verses in Pesukei Dezimra come from Psalms. “Although a few passages in Pesukei Dezimra are from other authors, the vast majority were written by King David. Even the two sections taken from

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“Among the notable exceptions is the very end of Pesukei Dezimra, where we recite Az Yashir, the Song that the Jewish people sang after miraculously crossing the Red Sea. This epic is considered the song of praise of the Jewish people and, therefore, merits its special place in the daily Pesukei Dezimra. It is singled out as such a special praise that halacha requires one to sing it daily, as if one had personally experienced this miraculous manifestation of G-d’s presence.

“Notwithstanding all its wondrous virtues, there is still some halachic controversy whether it should be recited as part of Pesukei Dezimra or not.”

“How so?”

“The Rambam, perhaps the greatest scholar of the last thousand years, mentions the recital of Az Yashir after Yishtabach, not before. Apparently, since King David did not author Az Yashir, the Rambam feels that it should not be included between the two blessings; only passages that are authored by King David should be included. I am personally unaware of any community that currently follows this practice.”

Hodu – Before Baruch She’amor or After?

Ron is ready with his next question: “I have noticed that some congregations begin Pesukei Dezimra with Baruch She’amor, while others begin with a different passage. What is the rationale behind these two different approaches?”

“King David taught this song to be sung on the day that the Aron, which held the Ten Commandments, was brought to the City of David, in the city of Jerusalem (Divrei Hayamim I 16). Later it was sung to accompany the daily offerings in the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, until the Beis Hamikdash was built (Seder Olam, Chapter 14). Thus, this praise is directly associated with the offerings of the Jewish people and, at the same time, it reflects the early history of the Jewish nation.

The question is whether we should recite it as part of the regular Pesukei Dezimra, albeit closer to the part of the prayer when we discuss the offerings, or whether it is a sequel to korbanos and prior to Pesukei Dezimra.

Ashkenazic practice follows the first approach and Sefardic, the latter – two old customs, both cited by early authoritative sources (Tur).”

Pesukei Dezimra: Fulfilling Hashem’s Only Desire

“How is your practice? Do you have a preference?”

“Could you sum up in a few words what we have learned today?”

“Rather than my words, I will cite a great early scholar, the Ramban: ‘All that Hashem desires from this world is that man should thank Him for creating him, focus on His praise when he prays, and that the community pray together with concentration: Mankind should gather together and thank the Lord who created them, broadcasting: We are your creations!’” (Ramban, Shemos 13:16).

To this, Ron replied: “You just mentioned that the community should recite the praises together. In my visits to different synagogues, I have noticed that in the Sefardic community the entire congregation recites these prayers in unison. In many other synagogues, someone begins and ends each passage aloud, so that everyone can read from the same place. It seems, from your description, that this is the proper way one should recite these prayers.

“However, in some shuls that I frequent, the prayers seem far more chaotic. Although these shuls are, thank G-d, very crowded and well attended, people arrive at different times, and each person starts praying by himself. No one leads the services until after Pesukei Dezimra is complete, and they are certainly not said in unison. I must admit that I do not find this part of the services very attractive. It certainly does not fit the beautiful description you just gave me.”

Yosel shifted uncomfortably, realizing that Ron is absolutely correct. “It is embarrassing to admit that we are not doing what we should,” he began.

“Your criticism is extremely well founded. Would you be willing to come with me and speak to the Rabbi of our congregation about the problem? I admit that the problem has bothered me for a while, but I have not had the gumption to do anything about it. Perhaps you can help me?”