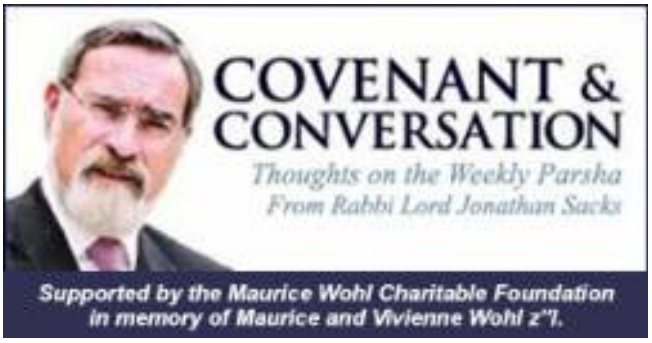
In this Issue



We Are What We Remember

One reason religion has survived in the modern world despite four centuries of secularization is that it answers the three questions every reflective human being will ask at some time in his or her life: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?

These cannot be answered by the four great institutions of the modern West: science, technology, the market economy and the liberal democratic state. Science tells us how but not why. Technology gives us power but cannot tell us how to use that power. The market gives us choices but does not tell us which choices to make. The liberal democratic state as a matter of principle holds back from endorsing any particular way of life. The result is that contemporary culture sets before us an almost infinite range of possibilities, but does not tell us who we are, why we are here, and how we should live.

Yet these are fundamental questions. Moses' first question to God in their first encounter at the burning bush was "Who am I?" The plain sense of the verse is that it was a rhetorical question: Who am I to undertake the extraordinary task of leading an entire people to freedom? But beneath the plain sense was a genuine question of identity. Moses had been brought up by an Egyptian princess, the daughter of Pharaoh. When he rescued Jethro's daughters from the local Midianite shepherds, they went back and told their father, "An Egyptian man delivered us." Moses looked and spoke like an Egyptian.

He then married Zipporah, one of Jethro's daughters, and spent decades as a Midianite shepherd. The chronology is not entirely clear but since he was a relatively young man when he went to Midian and was eighty years old when he started leading the Israelites, he spent most of his adult life with his Midianite father-in-law, tending his sheep. So when he asked God, "Who am I?" beneath the surface there was a real question. Am I an Egyptian, a Midianite, or a Jew?

By upbringing he was an Egyptian, by experience he was a Midianite. Yet what proved decisive was his ancestry. He was a descendant of Abraham, the child of Amram and Yocheved. When he

asked God his second question, "Who are you?" God first told him, "I will be what I will be." But then he gave him a second answer:

> Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, *the God of your fathers-the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob* - has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, the name you shall call Me from generation to generation.

Here too there is a double sense. On the surface God was telling Moses what to tell the Israelites when they asked, "Who sent you to us?" But at a deeper level the Torah is telling us about the nature of identity. The answer to the question, "Who am I?" is not simply a matter of where I was born, where I spent my childhood or my adult life or of which country I am a citizen. Nor is it answered in terms of what I do for a living, or what are my interests and passions. These things are about *where* I am and *what* I am but not *who* I am.

God's answer - I am the God of your fathers - suggests some fundamental propositions. First, identity runs through genealogy. It is a matter of who my parents were, who their parents were and so on. This is not always true. There are adopted children. There are children who make a conscious break from their parents. But for most of us, identity lies in uncovering the story of our ancestors, which, in the case of Jews, given the unparalleled dislocations of Jewish life, is almost always a tale of journeys, courage, suffering or escapes from suffering, and sheer endurance.

Second, the genealogy itself tells a story. Immediately after telling Moses to tell the people he had been sent by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God continued:

> "Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt. *And I have promised to bring you up* out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites - a land flowing with milk and honey.'

It was not simply that God was the God of their ancestors. He was also the God who made certain promises: that he would bring from slavery to freedom, from exile to the Promised Land. The Israelites were part of a narrative extended over time. They were part of an unfinished story, and God was about to write the next chapter.

What is more, when God told Moses that He was the God of the Israelites' ancestors, He added, "This is My eternal name, this is how I am to be recalled [*zikhri*] from generation to generation." God was here saying that He is *beyond* time - "This is My eternal name" - but when it comes to human understanding, He lives *within* time, "from generation to generation." The way He does this is through the handing on of memory: "This is how I am to be recalled." Identity is not just a matter of who my parents were. It is also a matter of *what they remembered and handed on to me*.

Personal identity is shaped by individual memory. Group identity is formed by collective memory.[1]

All of this is by way of prelude to a remarkable law in today's parsha. It tells us that first-fruits were to be taken to "the place God chooses," i.e. Jerusalem. They were to be handed to the priest, and each was to make the following declaration:

> "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great, powerful and populous nation. The Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our suffering, our harsh labor and out distress. The Lord then brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great fearsomeness and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. I am now bringing the first-fruits of the soil that you, Lord, have given me." (Deut. 26:5-10)

We know this passage because, at least since Second Temple times it has been a central part of the Haggadah, the story we tell at the Seder table. But note that it was originally to be said on bringing firstfruits, which was not on Pesach. Usually it was done on Shavuot.

What makes this law remarkable is this: We would expect, when celebrating the soil and its produce, to speak of the God of nature. *But this text is not about nature. It is about history.* It is about a distant ancestor, a "wandering Aramean." It is the story of our ancestors. It is a narrative explaining why I am here, and why the people to whom I belong is what it is and where it is. There was nothing remotely like this in the ancient world, and there is nothing quite like it today. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi said in his classic book *Zakhor*,[2] Jews *were the first people to see God in history, the first to see an overarching meaning in history, and the first to make memory a religious duty.*

That is why Jewish identity has proven to be the most tenacious the world has ever known: the only identity ever sustained by a minority dispersed throughout the world for two thousand years, one that eventually led Jews back to the land and state of Israel, turning Hebrew, the language of the Bible, into a living speech again after a lapse of many centuries in which it was used only for poetry and prayer. We are what we remember, and the first-fruits declaration was a way of ensuring that Jews would never forget.

In the past few years, a spate of books has appeared in the United States asking whether the American story is still being told, still being taught to children, still framing a story that speaks to all its citizens, reminding successive generations of the battles that had to be fought for there to be a "new birth of freedom," and the virtues needed for liberty to be sustained.[3] The sense of crisis in each of these works is palpable, and though the authors come from very different positions in the political spectrum, their thesis is roughly the same: If you forget the story, you will

lose your identity. There is such a thing as a national equivalent of Alzheimer's. Who we are depends on what we remember, and in the case of the contemporary West, a failure of collective memory poses a real and present danger to the future of liberty.

Jews have told the story of who we are for longer and more devotedly than any other people on the face of the earth. That is what makes Jewish identity so rich and resonant. In an age in which computer and smartphone memories have grown so fast, from kilobytes to megabytes to gigabytes, while human memories have become so foreshortened, there is an important Jewish message to humanity as a whole. You can't delegate memory to machines. You have to renew it regularly and teach it to the next generation. Winston Churchill said: "The longer you can look back, the further you can see forward."[4] Or to put it slightly differently: Those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children's future.

1. The classic works on group memory and identity are Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, and Jacques le Goff, *History and Memory*, Columbia University Press, 1992.
2. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. University of Washington Press, 1982. See also Lionel Kochan, *The Jew and His History*, London, Macmillan, 1977.
3. Among the most important of these are Charles Murray, *Coming Apart*, Crown, 2013; Robert Putnam, *Our Kids*, Simon and Shuster, 2015; Os Guinness, *A Free People's Suicide*, IVP, 2012; Eric Metaxas, *If You Can Keep It*, Viking, 2016; and Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, Basic Books, 2016.
4. Chris Wrigley, *Winston Churchill: a biographical companion*, Santa Barbara, 2002, xxiv.

Serving God with Joy

Devarim, 28:47: "Since you did not serve Hashem, your God, with joy and goodness of heart, from *rov kol* (the abundance of everything).[1]"

The devastating rebuke makes up much of Ki Tavo. In the rebuke we are told that the reason for such terrible punishments, is that we did not serve God with *simcha* (joy). The question arises as where were we ever told in the Torah that there is an obligation to have *simcha*? The apparent answer is that it does not say it anywhere in the Torah. It does say in Psalms that we should serve God with joy, but that was written hundreds of years after this rebuke, so how could it be that such severe punishments are given for something that is not even commanded in the Torah?! One may try to answer that with regard to the festivals, the Torah tell us, *'v'samachta bechagecha'*, be joyful with your festivals. Yet, the Sages tell us that this instruction refers to eating meat and wine.

Accordingly, where is there a Mitzva of simcha in the Torah? Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits answers that it is found in the mitzvah of *ahavat hashem* – to love God. As he expresses it:

> The mitzvah of *ahavat HaShem* is to walk around with a real feeling of joy to be alive, joy to have been created by the Master of the Universe and put into this beautiful world. It is of living a life where Divine Providence is leading you on a path to become bigger and more mature and wiser and closer to the Master of the Universe. This is the mitzvah of *ahavat HaShem*.

If a person loves God, then he sees the beauty of life, including the difficulties of life. He watches with excitement as another challenge approaches and he knows that God is sending this as another way to grow closer to him, and he happily serves God even in difficult times. This is such an important aspect of *avodat HaShem* (Divine Service), that the lack of joy that the people had was responsible for the terrible predictions of the Portion.

How does a person attain the *ahavat HaShem* that is the cause of joy? Rabbi Berkovits explains, based on the Rambam, that one comes to a love of God by contemplating the Torah and nature. With regard to nature, that first refers to the dramatic features of nature such as the heavens, great seas and so on. But it also refers to the smaller things – the wonderful, natural fruit that God created, that look nice, taste nice and even have a pleasant smell. Saying a blessing before we eat is supposed to help inculcate that feeling of appreciation which can lead to love.

Rabbi Berkovits adds that the human body is an incredible wonder of wonders. In his words:

> "Digestion – do you know what goes on inside you? the breaking down of food. the enzymes at work. the food is broken down in a way that the various nutrients are sent to the parts of the body that need them. what's not needed is sent out. the blood is constantly being purified. this little kidney. it purifies the blood. When it doesn't work and they have to use a machine. it's not as good, and it's so much bigger. the heart. this muscle that pumps, and it has its own built in electrical system. this is not an analogy, but it produces electricity that keeps it going. in theory the heart does not need the brain to tell it to operate and make it work. it has its own electricity. the human eye. this lens, it focuses, gets bigger and smaller, focuses, takes in just the right amount of light, sensitizes the optic nerve which sends a message to the brain which gives us vision. the human body which is made of a trillion cells that are constantly replenishing themselves. it is just so perfect.

The other main way of coming to love of God is through learning Torah with contemplation of the unmatched wisdom of the Written and Oral Law. The experience of delving deeply into Torah topics and seeing the inherent truth in the words of the Torah is the ultimate way to bring a person closer to God.

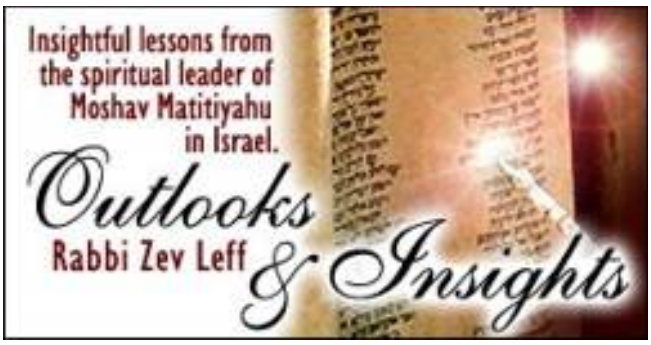
Rabbi Berkovits concludes:

> Between the infinite wisdom and kindness in the Creation, and the infinite wisdom and kindness in what the Master of the World gave us in Torah, the human being should feel ecstatic, and should want to feel closer and closer to God.

There is one more method of getting closer to God that the Rambam mentions: *mesirut nefesh* – self-sacrifice for God. On the highest level, this refers to being willing to give up one's life for the sake of God, because when a person is prepared to go so far to serve God, that demonstrates an unparalleled closeness to God. Throughout Jewish history, Jews have had ample opportunity to risk their lives in order to keep the Torah, but nowadays, this is no longer a *nisayon* (test). The way to tap into the power of *mesirut nefesh* nowadays is to be willing to give something up for the sake of doing a Mitzva. Overcoming a natural desire, laziness, or materialism is the way a person can come close to God through self-sacrifice.

We have seen the seriousness of not serving God with joy and how this emanates from the Mitzva of *ahavat HaShem*. Through learning Torah, contemplating nature and *mesirut nefesh*, a person can strive to increase his love of God with the inevitable consequence of *simcha*.

1. Ki Savo, 28:47.



First and Foremost

"You shall take of every fruit of the ground produced by the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You must place it in a basket, and go to the site that God will choose."(Deut. 26:2)

The Torah commands us to take the first fruits and bring them to the Kohen as a thanksgiving offering to God. Elsewhere we are enjoined to dedicate all our "firsts" to God – the first shearings of the wool, the first of the dough, the firstborn of man and animal, etc. Why does the Torah command us to offer the *first* of our produce instead of the *best*?

The importance of the "first" lies in the fact that it is the root and foundation of all that follows. The foundation of a building must be totally free of imperfections. A hairline crack in the foundation endangers the entire building, whereas that same crack in the fourth floor would not be significant. Similarly, with respect to everything having to do with *kedusha*, the beginning must be holy and pure if holiness and purity are to emanate from it. Any imperfection in the root will manifest itself a hundredfold in what grows out of it. Therefore,

we dedicate all "firsts" to God to firmly establish the foundation and root of all that follows.

The Talmud (Yerushalmi – Chagiga) blames Elisha ben Avuya's tragic departure from the path of Torah on an incident that occurred on the day of his *brit*. The great Sages of Jerusalem were discussing Torah at his *brit* with such intensity that a fire descended from the heavens and surrounded them. When Elisha's father saw this, he announced that he would devote his son to Torah so that he would also be able to work such wonders.

His father's distorted motivation left its mark on his brilliant son, when later in life Elisha came to distorted conclusions on the basis of various incidents he witnessed. He saw a child fall to his death while fulfilling his father's command to send away the mother bird before taking her eggs. Since the Torah specifically promises length of days for honoring one's parents and sending away the mother bird, he concluded there is neither justice nor a judge. (Rabbi Yaakov, however, saw that reward for mitzvos is not in this world but rather in the next.)

GOOD BEGINNINGS

And so, too, from a good beginning comes good. The Talmud (Bava Metzia 85b) relates that when Rebbe Chiya reintroduced Torah in a generation in which it had been forgotten, he began by planting flax. From the flax he made nets to capture deer. Upon the skins of those deer he wrote the Five Books of the Torah. He would then travel from town to town teaching Torah to five boys in each town. With each he learned one book of Chumash. To six older boys he taught one order of Mishnah each. Each then taught the others what he had learned, and in this way, Torah was once again established.

Why was it necessary for Rebbe Chiya to plant the flax and make the nets? Couldn't he have *bought* these? The answer is that every new beginning is the construction of a foundation. Only if every step is taken with holy and pure intentions will the result be holy and pure.

The same principle answers a question asked with respect to Chanukah: Why was a miracle necessary to insure that the menorah not be lit with impure oil? The law is that impure oil may be used for a mitzvah incumbent on the community.

[The answer is that] Chanukah was a rededication of the Temple and the Menorah. As such it was a new beginning, and only pure oil was fitting. Only when the holiness has been firmly established can impure oil be used for its maintenance.

The special significance that the Sages attach to the education of young children lies in the fact that we are setting the foundations of their Torah. Similarly, the blessings and curses uttered upon our entrance into the Land of Israel, at Mount Eival and Mount Grizim, emphasize the fact that our first encounter with Israel must set the foundation for our future settlement of the land. That required an intense awareness of our duties and responsibilities.

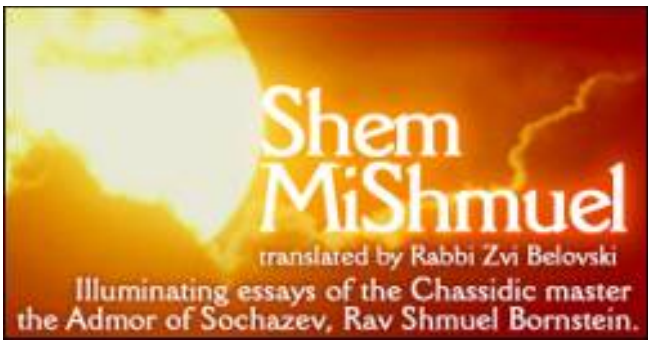
NEW YEAR

During the Ten Days of Repentance from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, it is customary to be

extra stringent in one's observance of mitzvot. Thus, even one who is not usually strict about eating kosher bread baked by a non-Jew *(pas palter)* should nevertheless be strict during that period. At first glance this practice seems difficult to understand, for it applies even to a person who intends to eat *pas palter* the rest of the year. Are we trying to fool God into thinking we are more pious than we actually are in order to secure a favorable judgment?

The significance of this conduct lies in the fact that Rosh Hashanah is not just the beginning of the year, but *reishis hashana* – the foundation and root of the year. Each of these ten days must be treated as firsts, dedicated to God in purity and holiness. Hence the extra stringencies, the more intense prayer and learning, are not merely for show. They are designed to lay the foundation for the entire year. Even if the building of the coming year is not constructed of such quality materials, the foundation will give it strength.

Thus did [King Solomon], the wisest of men say, *tov acharis davar me'resihiso* (Ecclesiastes 7:8), which is usually translated as *"The end of the matter is greater than the beginning,"* but can also be understood, *"A good end emanates from the beginning."*



The Torah Written On Stone

> Moshe and the elders of Yisrael commanded the people, saying, "Keep all of the mitzvah which I am commanding you today. And it shall be on the day on which you pass over the Jordan to the land which the Lord your God gives to you, you shall erect for yourselves great stones and coat them with plaster. And you shall write on them all the words of this Torah when you have passed over, in order that you shall go into the land which the Lord your God gives to you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your forefathers, said to you. And it shall be when you have passed over this Jordan that you shall erect these stones which I am commanding you today on Mount Eival, and you shall coat them with plaster...And you shall write on the stones all the words of this Torah very clearly." (Devarim 27:1-4,8)

Let us consider this most unusual mitzvah, the writing of a Torah not in the normal manner, but instead on stones. It is noteworthy that the normal material on which the text of the Torah is written is parchment, the skin of a kosher beast, which

comes from the animal kingdom, whereas on this occasion it was to be written on stone, an inanimate substance. This fundamental difference holds the key to understanding the purpose of this one-time mitzvah, which was performed as *klal Yisrael* entered the land.

My holy father noted that the whole function of writing a *sefer Torah* (1) is to fix the ideas contained therein firmly in the heart of the writer. This is expressed by the following verse:

> "...write them upon the tablet of your heart." (Mishlei 3:3)

Indeed, the parchment which is used for a *sefer Torah* is intended to reflect this great aim. The hide of the animal must first be treated before the writing may commence. If the untreated skin is used, the whole exercise is futile, as the writing is invalid. This symbolizes the fact that one needs preparation before Torah can be successfully received. Just as the skin needs refining before the writing will be valid, so too, one needs to take steps to remove any traces of personal defilement before beginning one's Torah development.

The problem with this is that it is Torah study itself which enables the person to overcome any intrinsic character defects:

> Come and see! No man is ever purified except with the words of Torah. (Zohar HaKadosh 3:80b)

How, then, can this vicious circle be broken? It seems that to achieve purification one needs Torah, but to learn Torah requires prior purification!

TWO ASPECTS OF THE SOUL

Actually, we may resolve this difficulty by suggesting that there are two distinct facets to the Jewish heart. The deepest and most fundamental aspect is the seat of the Divine soul; this is completely undefilable and impervious to alien forces. The second, more external manifestation of the Jewish heart is much more impressionable; it is able to receive influence from outside. This means that while it can receive good influences, it is also defilable by bad influences. It is this secondary aspect which one is enjoined to purify. This will enable it to accept and retain Torah knowledge and ideals.

The way this works should be clear. The inner aspect of the heart is always capable of instigating a program of Torah study and mitzvah observance. By stimulating this inner, Godly element, one will enable its influence to spread to the coarser, outer manifestation, which will have a cleansing and purifying effect. Once this stage has been reached, even the secondary aspect of the heart will be ready to receive the Torah. Without this prior purification, nothing positive will result. It is the first stage to which the Zohar refers, in which the inner core of the Jew grasps the Torah and allows it to spread to the rest of the personality. The second step is similar to the writing of a *sefer Torah*, in which the skin is prepared before the writing commences. The hide hints at the outer part of the personality, which must first be prepared before it can successfully receive the Torah.

This is hinted at by the very requirement to write a *sefer Torah* on parchment, the product of an

animal. The animal world is subject to change. The passage of time affects the animal, and the processes of nature ensure that after a certain period the animal's cells are replenished. This symbolizes the outer part of the heart, which is also subject to change, for through the influence of the inner, undefilable part, it can be improved and sanctified. However, the inner, intrinsically holy part of the personality is unchanging and unchangeable. As such, it is represented by stone, which is the least changing entity in the creation.

When *klal Yisrael* were about to enter Eretz Yisrael, they were making a new start in a new land. They needed a tangible reminder of the correct way in which to begin their service of God. Thus God required them to erect stones and write the text of the Torah upon them. This indicates that the first element of Divine service comes from the innermost, unchanging part of the personality. They were to try to arouse the holy attachment to Torah which lay deep within them and allow it to pervade and purify the rest of their personalities.

1. Note that there is a mitzvah to write a Torah scroll, which is incumbent upon each individual (Devarim 31:19), and an additional obligation on the Jewish king to write a second scroll (ibid. 17:18).