

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

KI TABO
HAPPY BIRTHDAY RUBY! (SEPT 7)
SEPTEMBER 8, 2012 21 ELUL 5772

Please see High Holiday Schedule and Bidding List attached

Friday Night: Candles: 6:57 PM –
Afternoon and Evening service (Minha/Arbith): 7:00 PM

Morning Service (Shaharith): 9:00AM –Please say Shemah at home by 8:58 AM

11:00 - 12:00 Shabbat Morning Kids Program for girls ages 4-8 - Stories, Tefillah, Games, Snacks and more . . .

Kiddush this week : By Danny Wagner “ in honor of all the fantastic members of the congregation” Thanks Danny for coming through when we had no sponsor.

4:30 - 5:00 Learn to Read from the Torah with Rabbi Yosef - nusach Yerushalmi - Men and Boys of all ages invited.

5:00 until Arvit - Shabbat Afternoon Kids Program with Rabbi Yosef and Riki Waldman; Ice Cream, Tanach Stories, Basketball, Hoolahoop, Parsha Quiz, 613 Mitzva Memory Contest, Shabbat Charades and our weekly Raffles

Pirkei Avot with Rabbi Aharon at 5:35 PM –followed by Minha: 6:20 PM –
Seudah Shelishi and a Class 7:00 – with David –
Evening Service (Arbith): 7:50 PM - Shabbat Ends: 7:56PM

Weekday Tefilla Schedule –
NEW MINCHA AND ARBIT SUNDAY – 6:30 followed by soft Ball
Selichot – 7:20AM on Sunday followed by Shaharit at 8:00
During the week Selihot at 6:15AM followed by Shaharit at 7:00AM

Weekday Torah Class Schedule
Monday Night Class with Rabbi Yenay – 8PM Monday night, followed by Arvit

Tuesday class cancelled

WEDNESDAY – SCHEDULE REVISION

Spiritual & Personal Growth with Rabbi Yaakov Siegel will continue after the holidays.
MOVED FROM TUESDAY – AT 7:45- Gitta J. Neufeld, Director of Education at The Allegra Franco School of Educational Leadership on the book of Jonah – Last Class - Men and Women are invited. Please give us feedback. Link to third class and handout.

<http://torahcentral.com/YUTorah/lecture.php?781565/Mrs. Gitta J. Neufeld/Yona III>

Registration is underway for the continuation of our Kosher Kitchen Class series with Rabbi Yosef for men and ladies. Classes will resume in October. Details to follow . . .

Gentlemen, please advise if you will be joining us for Halacha class on Tuesday evenings at 8:30 beginning November in Hilchot Pesach Belyun.

Community Events

Community wide Men's Softball Event for Sunday evening September 9th 7-9pm at the Rec. Spread the word and contact Rabbi Yosef or Sam Shetrit for more details.

Cub Scout Registration is under way! If you'd like to sign up or know somebody who might, please contact Rabbi Yosef.

Registration is underway for Fall Sunday Funday Hoolahoop in for girls ages 5 and up in the Sephardic Congregation of Long Beach. Sunday mornings from 10:00-11:00

please reply to
ShabbatShalomNewsletter@gmail.com

Sisterhood Rosh HaShanah Greetings; the whole congregation \$18 and individual listings \$1 each. Please email Rebecca Ovadia at: uft183@yahoo.com. Please make checks out to the Sephardic Congregation of Long Beach Sisterhood. The chag is upon us so please respond promptly. Deadline is this Monday September 10th.

A message from Goldie Isaacs: It is with great appreciation and gratitude that I am writing to our Sephardic Synagogue Community for your thoughtfulness and prayers during the recuperation period following my shoulder surgery. I have been heart-warmed by your calls of well wishes and gifts of food. Thank You.

Take a peek into Kosher Culinary Arts School in Jerusalem with my daughter Mikhayla who is going through a rigorous 6 month program.
bitemebymik.blogspot.com

Dear Friends,

I have been working with a family in my side gig as The Rabbi! The father has been going through Cancer Treatments for 4 ½ years and though there is no cure, B'H the doctors have stopped the progression and the man looks forward to heading back to work. We have been meeting with the doctors and the insurance people. Finally last week, we were able to \$250,000 in bills to \$7000. The doctors have been incredible. They are only asking for a very small reimbursement of expenses outlaid. So now I need to raise the \$7000 and write a check to the doctors. I have already

received a pledge for \$1800 from one of my cousins. I'm hoping the rest of you will help with the \$5200 this week as we head into Rosh Hashana. Anything you can do to help would be greatly appreciated. Email me back your pledge.

The check can be made to
 The Sephardic Congregation of Long Beach
 And in the memo (Cholim Fund)
 P.O. Box 567 Long Beach, New York 11561

Daily Minyan Mon – Thurs at 979 Third Avenue, 17th Floor, Artistic Frame at 4PM – Please join us!
212-289-2100

A wide range of community leaders in Brooklyn have asked me to include the following this week:

We are asking you to please vote for Assemblyman Steven Cymbrowitz on a new election day: Thursday September 13th. On Thursday, September 13th there will be an important election taking place in our neighborhood. We proudly endorse Steven Cymbrowitz for re-election to the State Assembly. Steven has been our Assemblyman for the past 12 years. He has demonstrated consistent loyal support for the Jewish community and is a tremendous advocate in Albany on matters that impact our children and community. During his tenure, he has secured capital grants for the construction of SAFE, Sephardic Community Center (SCC), and Sephardic Bikur Holim (SBH). Using his seniority, Steven has been able to advocate strongly on behalf of our yeshivot for crucial funding increases, tax relief, and reimbursement programs. Steven has also demonstrated his political commitment to defend our community's values. These achievements would not have

been possible without Steve's collaborative leadership style and his unwavering dedication to our community. Now it is crucial that we be there for him by going out and voting in the upcoming election on Thursday, September 13th. It is for these reasons that we are so passionate in our support of Steven. Please join us in heading to the polls on Thursday, September 13th to help re-elect Steven Cymbrowitz to the State Assembly.

Editors Notes

Last week I noted that if you never heard the story of former Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, you should read his book, *Out of the Depths: The Story of a Child of Buchenwald Who Returned Home at Last*. I heard Rabbi Lau speak a number of times, I had read articles, but never read the book myself, until this weekend when I took my own advice. I ordered the book when writing last week's newsletter. It arrived Friday and I read through it on Sunday and Monday. Its difficult to describe how moving it is. The imagery of a little boy surviving and being discovered at the age of 8 in the death camps by American troops and rising through the ashes to become the chief Rabbi of Israel will burn its way into your soul. The myth of a phoenix rising comes true in the life of Rabbi Lau.

This week, we read the portion of Ki Tavo which includes the Tochacha – and when we do I am reminded of a story I heard from Rabbi Abittan relating to the Holocaust. The verses warn of unimaginable horrors: exile, starvation, rape, robbery, and torture -- to name just a few. The custom of Jews world-over is to read the verses of tochacha quietly, so as not to rile up enemies, celestial and otherwise, who may think those calamities a

good idea to cast upon the Jewish Nation. I am reminded of this story exactly at the point of the reader lowering his voice. And with it in mind I often tell him to raise his voice a bit from an inaudible whisper so that everyone can at least hear the words.

I wanted to double check the details so I turned to my professor, Mr Google and found a version as told by a very special man, William Goldberg A'H who I was quite fond of, to another friend Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky. A version of it is also told by Rabbi Frand.

After World War II, the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yukisiel Halberstam, of blessed memory, a survivor of the concentration camps held a minyan in the Beth Moses Hospital in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Parshas Ki Tavo arrived and with it, the section known as the tochacha (admonishment), which is filled with foreboding warnings of doom and destruction, lest the Jewish nation stray from the will of G-d.

So it was the portion of Ki Savo, and the Klausenberger Rebbe and his minyan of ravaged survivors were about to read the tochacha and re-live horrors of their recent history through the words of the ancient prophecies.

The Torah-reader started the verses of doom in a hushed tone. He began reading them quietly and quickly. Suddenly the Rebbe banged on his lectern. "Hecher!" he shouted. (Yiddish for louder.)

The reader looked up from the Torah with a puzzled look on his face. Perhaps he was reading the Torah a bit too low. He raised his voice a notch, and continued in a louder undertone. But the Rebbe

was not satisfied. "Louder!" he exclaimed.

By now the reader was reading as loudly as his normal recitation, and yet the Rebbe continued to bang on the lectern and exclaim, "HECHER!" The reader could not contain his puzzlement and instead of shouting the portion he stopped and looked to the Rebbe for an explanation.

"We no longer have to read these miserable curses quietly," the Rebbe exclaimed. "There is no curse we have not experienced. There is no affliction we have not suffered! We saw it all. We lived it all. Let us shout with pride to our Father in Heaven that we have already received all the curses! We have survived these curses, and now it is His turn to bring us the blessings and the redemption!" And with that the reader continued reading the tochacha loud and clear as if singing an anthem to his nation's tenacity.

The life of Rabbi Lau is a testimony to our faith, our commitment, and most importantly our eternity. (Thanks to Rabbi Kaminetsky for his powerful words which Ive sprinkled through this article- and for his inspiration always).

It's difficult to accept the Holocaust no matter the apparent result. We are human and simply cannot fathom these atrocities and the reasoning behind them. Yet I found the following story as told over by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner a possible microcosm to allow us a peak into a world we can never understand.

"And you will be driven mad by the sight that your eyes will see. [28:34]"

The Netziv in his classic Haamek Davar explains in the following

way: You will be astonished, how can it be that a few gangsters have done so much (to you) and your hand that has been strong has been unable to save you. This is what will drive you mad.

Verber and Wechsler were certainly of the most famous escapees from the Nazi concentration camps. They even managed to take out of Auschwitz papers that documented the horrific killing apparatus that the Nazis had organized.

Auschwitz had an electrified fence that surrounded the inner camp with guard-towers every ten meters. These towers were only manned during the night. During the day, most inmates would work in the area outside the inner camp. This outer area was surrounded by a non-electrified fence and its guard towers were only manned during the day.

At the end of the day's work, the inmates would be marched into the inner camp and roll call would be taken. If all were accounted for, the gate of the inner fence would be locked and the guards manning the outer towers would move in to man the towers along the inner fence.

If anyone would be missing, a siren would sound and the search would begin. For the next three days, the outer fence would be manned continuously and hundreds of men--all SS men and their blood-hounds, the Ukrainian workers and the German common criminals who were also incarcerated in Auschwitz--would comb through every possible hiding place in both the inner and outer areas of the camp. If the escapees were not found after three days, a siren would signal the end of the search and the guards would resume their usual schedule, only manning the outer fence during the day.

At that time, Auschwitz was in the process of adding on additional bunkers. Neat and orderly piles of lumber were lined up in the outer area. The underground arranged that their people would be in charge of unloading and arranging the lumber that was delivered and they piled it up in a way that there was a small crawl space under the top three layers. Verber and Wechsler crawled into that area, had the top layers placed above them and covered themselves with Russian tobacco and kerosene in order to mask their scent from the dogs.

That night at roll call the siren sounded and the search began. The pile of lumber where Verber and Wechsler were hiding was passed tens of times but since the dogs ignored it, so did the searchers. Two and a half days went by and the hungry, frightened, exhausted escapees began to think that they would actually get away.

On the last day with just a few hours left, they heard two Germans approach the lumber pile. "Maybe they are in there?" they heard one say. "Impossible," the other retorted, "the dogs would have sniffed them out." They decided to check anyway. One layer was lifted off and then a second. They were about to begin lifting off the third layer when they heard shouts coming for the camp. Thinking that the escapees had been found, they ran to join the 'festivities,' never to continue their search of the woodpile.

A few hours later, the siren signaled the end of the search. When night fell, Verber and Wechsler began the arduous task of getting out of their hiding place. The three days of hunger, stiffness and terror had taken their toll. The lumber had become

so heavy. It took hours to push a few pieces over enough to allow them to crawl out. They then made their way under the unmanned, non-electrified fence to freedom.

Imagine the terror they felt as the first two layers were removed. Imagine the despair of those moments when the freedom that was so close seemed to be suddenly moving out of reach. Imagine how they must have been cursing the moment.

However, that which caused that terror, that torment and that despair was actually their salvation. They never would have had the strength to remove three layers of wood. Their hiding place would have become their burial place were it not for that close call.

Perhaps, that is how the events we're experiencing need to be viewed. Each act of terror, each close call is peeling away layer after layer, bringing the redemption that much closer.

I felt Rabbi Ciner's words to be quite provocative.

As we end the year we pray that it end with its curses and as we begin anew we pray, it begin with blessings. Haven't enough layers been peeled?

Tizku LeShanim Rabot
Shabbat Shalom
David Bibi

Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

Following the last two Parshios that focused on Justice and the value of individual rights, Moshe directed the nation's attention to the realities of what it meant to live in Eretz Yisroel.

Our behaviors, as well as natural law, are subject to the word of G-d and interface with each other in the most intimate example of cause and effect. As the Chosen People, our lifestyle should manifest the ever-present mastery of the Creator over mankind and the realization of the connection between our adherence of Mitzvot and the laws of nature. This is most apparent in Eretz Yisroel. As Moshe told the Bnai Yisroel in Parshas Ekev, (11:12) "It is therefore a land constantly under Hashem's scrutiny..." As clearly as the rain and dew fall, the land reflects G-d's presence. Keeping the mitzvot of the Torah proclaims in word and deed G-d's mastery over man and results in nature serving man as her accepted master. By ignoring or opposing the Torah we deny G-d's mastery over man; and in turn, nature opposes man's attempts at mastery over the natural world.

During the 40 years of the desert, the Jews were being prepared to accept the reality of Hashem's mastery and the responsibility of keeping His mitzvot. Now, in Parshas Ki Savo, as they were poised to cross the Yarden and assume their intended place as "... highest of all the nations on earth." (28:1) Moshe commanded a number of declarations and ceremonies. These ceremonies would underscore the cause and effect relationship that exists between adherence to Torah, the laws of nature, and the divine responsiveness of the land.

1st & 2nd Aliyot: The Parsha begins with the Mitzvot of the first fruits and the completion of the Tithing cycles. Both are accompanied by special declarations of Hashem's mastery over the land, and man's responsibility to keep the commandments of Hashem.

4th & 5th Aliyot: Moshe presents a statement of allegiance between Hashem and His People. We are to keep the Torah and Hashem guarantees us praise, fame and glory as the "highest of all the nations". (26:19) Upon crossing the Yarden, the Nation will publicly declare its acceptance of Hashem's covenant by: inscribing the Torah upon twelve stones; erecting them as a monument; and the ceremony of blessings and curses that is to take place between the opposing mountains, Grizim and Ayval.

6th Aliya: Commonly known as the Tochacha the admonitions and punishments. It describes the consequences that will befall the Jewish people if they ignore Hashem's Torah and his providence. The custom is for the Reader to read this Aliya more quickly and quietly than the rest of the Parsha.

7th Aliya: The Parsha concludes with the beginning of Moshe's final discourse. He starts by recounting the miraculous nature of the past 40 years and its clear indication of Hashem's ever present protection, past and future.

This week's Haftorah Isaiah 60:1-22 of Consolation refocuses us on the messianic vision of a nation and world united behind a single goal and purpose.

"Lift up your eyes round about... they are all gathered together... (60:4) Your gates will be continually open... so that men may bring to you the wealth of nations, with their kings led in procession. (60:11) Violence will no longer be heard in your land... but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise". (60:18)

As in the times of Yishayuhu, we too are in need of consolation. "Your people will all be righteous; they will possess the land forever... (60:21) May we soon be comforted!

EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

"Hashem will strike you with madness and with blindness and with confounding of the heart." (Debarim 28:28)

Listen to the most amazing story that involves our perashah (quoted from Veharev Nah). A couple had a new baby boy born to them. However the baby cried a lot. Not a lot, but he cried night and day and would not stop crying. They went to the doctors, they went to specialists, they went through all the painful tests without any clue as to why the baby wouldn't stop crying. The parents were going crazy. The baby had no regular times to eat or to sleep, nor for play or rest. The parents didn't get a break during the week and no break on Shabbat. There was no life with this baby, and the baby suffered so much.

One day the mother went to the marketplace. She noticed a worn-out page of printed Hebrew writing lying under one of the vegetable stands, and realized it was a page from a Humash. Even though she couldn't read, she recognized that it was from a Humash because she always looked into a Humash while the reading took place in shul. In order to retrieve the page, she had to bend down into the mud and get under the vegetable stand and stretch to get it. All the while, the onlookers were watching her in wonderment. She lifted the muddy page, cleaned it and kissed it. She then said, "May Hashem send a full recovery to

my baby through this holy page!" When she got home, she lovingly placed the page under the baby's pillow and said a silent prayer, "Please Hashem I am but a simple woman. I don't know how to read or write, but I do know that this is a page from your holy Torah. May it be your will that it should be an amulet to heal my son!"

All of a sudden, the baby stopped crying for the first time in his life. The baby fell into a peaceful sleep, and from then on, he was a different baby. The baby smiled and was happy, and never had any crying fits again. The husband came and said, "Who blessed the baby? Where did you go? How did this miracle happen?" His wife slid her hand under the pillow and showed him the page and said, "Look and see how powerful is our holy Torah!"

The husband read the verses contained on the page and went into shock! On that page were written the curses of our perashah. "Hashem will strike you with madness and with blindness, etc.!"

"What did you do? You put the Torah's curses under the baby's head!" the husband said. The wife turned white and said, "How was I to know?"

They both went to one of the great Rabbis with the page in hand. The saddik told them, "Your eyes have seen that Hashem has saved you. The curses turned into blessings in the merit of the mother of the baby who had simple faith and tried so hard to save the page with Hashem's name on it." Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Reuven Semah

After all the curses and punishments that are written in our perashah, the Torah says that this will happen if we don't serve Hashem with joy and happiness when we are blessed with everything.

The Rabbis tell us that doing misvot without happiness means it's a burden and a chore, and eventually people stop doing what is a bother. The Midrash points out another aspect about being happy. There was once a king whose son was not behaving properly and the king wanted to punish him. However, every time it was time to receive his punishment, the boy would smile and show such happiness at being with the king that the king could not bring himself to hurt his son. When we show that we are happy being the children of Hashem, He becomes filled with love for us and wants to send us berachah from heaven. Especially in our times, when people worry about the future and there are so many long faces around, this is the time we should remember this lesson. We should try to think about positive aspects of our lives and smile and be happy. This will spark within us a greater feeling of joy which will continue to make us feel good and accomplish more. And happiness is contagious, so others will become inspired and encouraged when they see us happy and content, and this could only have a greater ripple effect on those around us. So let's be happy and smile, and let's see the results. Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

Reading the Curses
Parashat Ki-Tabo is famous for the section known as the "Tocheha," which describes the Kelalot (curses), the horrific calamities that threaten to befall

Beneh Yisrael if we forsake God's commands. A similar section appears earlier in the Humah, in Parashat Behukotai, toward the end of the Book of Vayikra.

The Gemara notes a number of differences between the two sections. One difference is that the curses in Parashat Behukotai were dictated by God, whereas the curses here in Parashat Ki-Tabo were initiated by Moshe. Of course, God agreed with every letter, and it was thus all included in the Torah. But the curses in this Parasha were originally said by Moshe, and not by the Almighty.

At first glance, it seems very strange that Moshe would compose such horrific curses. Moshe Rabbenu was always our nation's greatest advocate, interceding to God on our behalf and trying to secure a favorable judgment for us. It seems "out of character" for Moshe to warn of such dreadful and frightening catastrophes.

To understand Moshe's intent in formulating these curses, let us first consider another comment of the Gemara. The Gemara teaches that Ezra, the leader of the Jewish people at the beginning of the Second Temple era, instituted that the curses of Parashat Ki-Tabo should be read every year in the final week or two of the year, before Rosh Hashanah. The reason, the Gemara explains, is "Tichleh Shana U'kelaloteha" – "the year should end along with its curses." We read the curses when the year ends to express our hope that just as the year is coming to an end, the curses that threaten us should likewise come to an end.

How does reading the curses help us ensure that they will end?

We might compare reading the curses to other forms of reading and study, such as studying about the Korbanot, the sacrifices brought in the Bet Ha'mikdash. Even without a Mikdash, when we cannot offer Korbanot, we can still gain access to the power and effects of the sacrifices by learning about them. This is why we include the Korbanot section in our daily prayer service. By learning about the sacrifices, we are considered as though we have actually offered them, and we thus gain the advantages of sacrifices despite our inability to place animals upon the altar. This applies to the Kelalot, as well. When we study the dreadful curses in this Parasha, we are considered to have actually experienced them – even though we have not actually gone through this suffering. Reading and learning the Kelalot is thus very beneficial for us, as it helps us avoid having to actually endure them. Even if, Heaven forbid, we are deserving of suffering, we can study this section in lieu of punishment.

This is why Ezra had us read the Kelalot right before Rosh Hashanah. As we stand in judgment before God, we can tell Him that even if we have sinned and failed, we should be considered as having already endured punishment, since we've read and studied the curses of Parashat Ki-Tabo. This is why many great Sadikim listen very intently to the reading of the Kelalot, keenly aware of just how powerful and beneficial this study is.

And this might be why Moshe Rabbenu wrote these Kelalot in the first place. He was not trying to curse us, but to the contrary, to help us avoid calamity. He gave us this section for us to carefully read and study, so that we can be regarded as having endured this

suffering and thereby earn atonement. The section of the Tocheha offers us the remarkable opportunity to achieve atonement for our sins without having to experience calamity and hardship. It is thus an invaluable asset, and an expression of immense love on the part of Moshe Rabbenu, who gave us this section to learn and probe as a means of averting calamity.

Rabbi Wein

The explicit descriptions of the disasters, personal and national, that make up a large portion of this week's parsha raise certain issues. Why do Moshe and the Torah paint such a harsh and unforgiving picture of the Jewish future before the people? And if we expect people to glory in their Jewishness, is this the way to sell the product, so to speak? We all support the concept of truth in advertising but isn't this over and above the necessary requirement?

The fact that the description of much of Jewish history and its calamitous events related in this parsha is completely accurate, prophecy fulfilled to the nth degree, only compounds the difficulties mentioned above. But in truth, there is clear reason for these descriptions of the difficulties inherent in being Jewish to be made apparent.

We read in this book of Devarim that God poses the stark choices before the Jewish people – life or death, uniqueness or conformity, holiness or mendacity. Life is made up of choices and most of them are difficult and fateful. Sugar coating the consequences of life's choices hardly makes for wisdom. Worse still, it erodes any true belief or sense of commitment in the choice that actually is made.

Without the necessary commitment, the choice itself over time becomes meaningless. The Torah tells us that being a Jew requires courage, commitment, a great sense of vision and eternity and deep self-worth. So the Torah must spell out the downside, so to speak, of the choice in being Jewish. The folk saying always was: "It is difficult to be a Jew." But, in the long run it is even more difficult and painful, eventually, for a Jew not to be a Jew in practice, thought and commitment.

According to Jewish tradition and Halacha, a potential convert to Judaism is warned by the rabbinic court of the dangers of becoming Jewish. He or she is told that Jews are a small minority, persecuted by many and reviled by others. But the potential convert also sees the vision and grandeur of Judaism, the inheritance of our father Avraham and our mother Sarah and of the sheltering wings of the God of Israel that guarantee our survival and influence. The potential convert is then asked to choose whether he or she is willing to truly commit to the project.

Without that commitment the entire conversion process is a sham and spiritually meaningless. And the commitment is not really valid if the downside, so to speak, of being Jewish is not explained and detailed. Judaism is not for fair-weather friends or soldiers on parade. The new phrase in the sporting world is that the players have to "grind it out." Well, that is what being Jewish means – to grind it out, daily, for an entire lifetime.

The positive can only outweigh the negative if the negative is known and defined. Those who look for an easy faith, a religion that demands nothing, who

commit to empty phrases but are never willing to pay the price of practice, adherence and discipline will not pass the test of time and survival that being Jewish has always required

Sir Jonathan Sacks Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth Listening and Law

It would be reasonable to assume that a language that contains the verb "to command" must also contain the verb "to obey." The one implies the other, just as the concept of a question implies the possibility of an answer. We would, however, be wrong. There are 613 commandments in the Torah, but there is no word in biblical Hebrew that means "to obey." When Hebrew was revived as a language of everyday speech in the nineteenth century, a word, *letsayet*, had to be borrowed from Aramaic. Until then there was no Hebrew word for "to obey."

This is an astonishing fact and not everyone was aware of it. It led some Christians (and secularists) to misunderstand the nature of Judaism: very few Christian thinkers fully appreciated the concept of mitzvah and the idea that God might choose to reveal Himself in the form of laws. It also led some Jews to think about mitzvot in a way more appropriate to Islam (the word Islam means "submitting" to God's law) than to Judaism. What word does the Torah use as the appropriate response to a mitzvah? Shema.

The root sh-m-a is a keyword in the book of Deuteronomy, where it occurs 92 times, usually in the sense of what God wants from us in response to the commandments. But the verb sh-m-a means many things. Here are

some of the meanings it has in Genesis:

[1] "To hear" as in "Abram heard that his relative [Lot] had been taken captive" (14: 14).

[2] "To listen, pay attention, heed" as in "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree" (3: 17) and "Then Rachel said: God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son" (30: 7).

[3] "To understand" as in "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (11: 7). This is how tradition understood the later phrase *Naaseh venishma* (Ex. 24: 7) to mean, "first we will do, then understand."

[4] "To be willing to obey" as the angel's words to Abraham after the binding of Isaac: "Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you were willing to obey me" (22:18). Abraham was about to obey God's command but at the last moment an angel said Stop.

[5] "To respond in deed, to do what someone else wants" as in "Do whatever Sarah tells you" (*sh'ma bekolah*, 21: 12). It is in this last sense that it comes closest in meaning to "obey."

The fact that *sh-m-a* means all these things suggests that in the Torah there is no concept of blind obedience. In general, a commander orders and a soldier obeys. A slave-owner orders and the slave obeys. There is no active thought process involved. The connection between the word of the commander and the deed of the commanded is one of action-and-reaction, stimulus-and-response. For practical purposes, the soldier or slave has no mind of his own. As Tennyson described the attitude of the soldiers before the Charge of the Light Brigade: "Ours not to reason why; ours but to do or die."

That is not how the Torah conceives the relationship between God and us. God, who created us in His image, giving us freedom and the power to think, wants us to understand His commands. Ralbag (Gersonides, 1288-1344) argues that it is precisely this that makes the Torah different:

Behold our Torah is unique among all the other doctrines and religions that other nations have had, in that our Torah contains nothing that does not originate in equity and reason. Therefore this Divine Law attracts people in virtue of its essence, so that they behave in accordance with it. The laws and religions of other nations are not like this: they do not conform to equity and wisdom, but are foreign to the nature of man, and people obey them because of compulsion, out of fear of the threat of punishment but not because of their essence.[1]

Along similar lines the modern scholar David Weiss Halivni speaks of "the Jewish predilection for justified law," and contrasts this with other cultures in the ancient world:

Ancient law in general is apodictic, without justification and without persuasion. Its style is categorical, demanding, and commanding ... Ancient Near Eastern law in particular is devoid of any trace of desire to convince or to win hearts. It enjoins, prescribes, and orders, expecting to be heeded solely on the strength of being an official decree. It solicits no consent (through justification) from those to whom it is directed.[2]

The Torah uses at least three devices to show that Jewish law is not arbitrary, a mere decree. First, especially evident throughout the book of Devarim,

is the giving of reasons for the commands. Often, though not always, the reason has to do with the experience of the Israelites in Egypt. They know what it feels like to be oppressed, to be a stranger, an outsider. I want you to create a different kind of society, says God through Moses, where slavery is more limited, where everyone is free one day a week, where the poor do not go hungry, and the powerless are not denied justice.

The second, most notably in the book of Bemidbar, is the juxtaposition of narrative and law, as if to say, the law is best understood against the backdrop of history and the experience of the Israelites in their formative years. So the law of the red heifer – purification from contact with the dead – occurs just before the death of Miriam and Aaron, as if to say, bereavement and grief interfere with our contact with God but this does not last for ever. We can become pure again. The law of *tsitsit* occurs after the story of the spies because (as I explained in an earlier Covenant and Conversation) both have to do with ways of seeing: the difference between seeing-with-fear and seeing-with-faith.

The third is the connection between law and metaphysics. There is a strong connection between Genesis 1, the story of creation, and the laws of *kedushah*, holiness. Both belong to *torat cohanim*, the priestly voice, and both are about order and the maintenance of boundaries. The laws against mixing meat and milk, wool and linen, and so on, are about respecting the deep structure of nature as described in the opening chapter of the Torah.

Throughout Devarim, as Moses reaches the summit of his leadership, he becomes an

educator, explaining to the new generation who will eventually conquer and inhabit the land, that the laws God has given them are not just Divine decrees. They make sense in human terms. They constitute the architectonics of a free and just society. They respect human dignity. They honour the integrity of nature. They give the land the chance to rest and recuperate. They protect Israel against the otherwise inexorable laws of the decline and fall of nations.

Only by recognizing God as their sovereign will they guard against overbearing kings and the corruptions of power. Time and again Moses tells the people that if they follow God's laws they will prosper. If they fail to do so they will suffer defeat and exile. All this can be understood in supernatural terms, but it can be understood in natural ways also.

That is why Moses, consistently throughout Devarim, uses the verb sh-m-a. He wants the Israelites to obey God, but not blindly or through fear alone. God is not an autocrat. The Israelites should know this through their own direct experience. They had seen how God, creator of heaven and earth, had chosen this people as His own, brought them from slavery to freedom, fed, sustained and protected them through the wilderness, and led them to victory against their enemies. God had not given the Torah to Israel for His sake but for theirs. As Weiss Halivni puts it: the Torah "invites the receiver of the law to join in grasping the beneficent effect of the law, thereby bestowing dignity upon him and giving him a sense that he is a partner in the law." [3]

That is the meaning of Moses' great words in this week's parsha: "Be silent, Israel, and listen! You have now become the people of

the Lord your God. Listen to the Lord your God and follow His commands and decrees that I give you today" (Deut. 27: 9-10). Keeping the commands involves an act of listening, not just submission and blind obedience – listening in all its multiple senses of attending, meditating and reflecting of the nature of God through creation, revelation and redemption. It means trying to understand our limits and imperfections as human beings. It means remembering what it felt like to be a slave in Egypt. It involves humility and memory and gratitude. But it does not involve abdication of the intellect or silencing of the questioning mind.

God is not a tyrant [4] but a teacher. [5] He seeks not just our obedience but also our understanding. All nations have laws, and laws are there to be obeyed. But few nations other than Israel set it as their highest task to understand why the law is as it is. That is what the Torah means by the word Shema.

AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL

Preparing For Yom Hadeen/Rosh Hashana

Rosh Hashana is the Yom Hadeen, a day of danger, of great peril. One more Mitzvah or one less sin could tip the scales in our favor. If you are a 'benoni', if your mitzvot and sins balance each other, then Hashem allows you to wait until Yom Kippur before your judgment is sealed. In that case, whatever remains to be done, you do on Yom Kippur. But in most cases the very greatest effort should be on Rosh Hashana. That is the day when we hope to be written and sealed immediately for a successful year. If that is the day for doing Teshuva, repentance, why shouldn't we say

'al chet', and mention our sins, all day long?

It is more fundamental to understand the great principles included in the words 'Hashem Melech' - The Dominion of Hashem! Not only when you sit and say it in the siddur, but even when you walk in the street, you must think 'Hashem Melech', Hashem is King. Practice up on it during weekdays. Every day for a minute or two, as you walk in the street, think 'Hashem Melech'; Hashem is in charge of the World !

He is looking at me every second; He is thinking of me. Then Hashem says: You are fulfilling the purpose of Rosh Hashana, and when Rosh Hashana comes and we shout Hashem Melech, it brings forth that potential greatness that we stored up in our minds all year. It bursts forth from our lungs: "Hashem Melech, Hashem Malach, Hashem Yimloch L'Olam Va'ed"

Long before Rosh Hashana we have to work on this great concept and to realize that Hashem is Watching us, to know that the whole world is filled with His Glory.

That is our great preparation for the Yom Hadeen.

Quoted from "Rabbi Avigdor Miller Speaks" ArtScroll

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