



Parashat Re'eh



English version

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The Art of Being Zionist

It is hard for me to hear a Jew in America say that because my sons learn in yeshiva instead of serving, he is a Zionist and I am not. What makes a person a Zionist? That he supports Israel, believes the Jewish people deserve a homeland, and stands behind the IDF. Fine — that is a real answer, and I respect it. But I live here. My children live here. We raise our family on this soil, pay taxes, and try our best to settle it. How is a man in New Jersey more Zionist than a man in Yerushalayim? Is Zionism only a position, a view — or is it also measured by how you live your life?

There are two questions every Jew needs to ask himself, and the whole fight comes from collapsing them into one.

One: In what way do you protect Zionism? Not "I support Israel." What did I actually do this year — with my time, my money, my body, my children — for the Jews of Israel?

Two: In what way do you protect Judaism? Not "I'm Jewish." What did I learn, what did I keep, what did I teach my children?

Both need an answer. Almost nobody answers both. The father whose sons wear a uniform points at question one and asks the yeshiva boy's father to explain himself. The father whose sons hold a Gemara points at question two and asks the same of him. Both are grading half the exam. This is how a nation tears itself apart while the world watches — and it is why the yeshiva draft is the one issue that keeps this country from ever holding a government together.

The two questions are separate, and each deserves its own honest answer. But they are not equal. For

two thousand years Judaism survived without Zionism. Zionism cannot survive one generation without Judaism. This Land is not neutral ground and never has been. It does not tolerate being held as ordinary real estate — וְתִקַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, the Land vomits out those who live on it without keeping the Torah (Vayikra 18:25).

Now listen to what the world has been saying to us. Of the 6,274 antisemitic incidents the ADL counted in America in 2025, forty-five percent invoked Israel or Zionism. And the sentence comes back on repeat: Anti-Zionism isn't antisemitism. We have nothing against Jews. We have nothing against Judaism. We object to a Jewish state. On campus it gets shortened to "Zionists off our campus."

It makes no sense. Every nation on earth is permitted a homeland. Every people is permitted safety. Somehow only one people is told that its need for a safe place is illegitimate. It cannot be defended by any principle — and when something cannot be defended by any principle, you are not looking at an argument anymore. You are looking at something else.

A rabbi born in Morocco in 1696 saw this coming. Rabbi Chaim ben Attar spent his life dreaming of Eretz Yisrael and printed his commentary, the Or HaChaim, in Venice in 1742 while raising the money for his aliyah. But to hear what he saw, I first need to teach you one Hebrew word.

I will give a thousand dollars to anyone who can tell me what the word אָז means in English. It means nothing. תְּבִיא אֶת הַכִּסֵּא — bring the chair. It is an arrow, pointing at the noun the verb is acting

on. (Ten percent of the time it means "with," five percent "from." The other eighty-five percent it means nothing at all. It is pure structure.) Now listen closely.

רָאָה אָנֹכִי נָתַן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה — See, I place before you today a blessing and a curse. No אָח. And that is strange, because the very next pasuk says אָח הַבְּרָכָה, and a few pesukim later אָח הַקְלָלָה on Har Grizim and אָח הַקְלָלָה on Har Eival. Two mountains, two ceremonies, two separate objects, each with its own אָח. But in the opening pasuk — nothing. Just בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה. Not two objects on two mountains. One thing, containing both.

What is it?

The Or HaChaim saw the problem in the dikduk and says something amazing. Moshe had just finished speaking about the Land — "every place your foot treads shall be yours" — and about what happens to those who live on it, depending on whether they keep the laws. So when Moshe says "I am placing before you today," the word today is precise. What is being given today is the Land. And within that single gift there is a blessing and there is a curse:

וְאָמְרוּ 'בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה' — פִּירוּשׁ: יֵשׁ בְּנִתְיָנָה זֶה בְּרָכָה וְיֵשׁ בָּהּ קְלָלָה... אִם תִּשְׁמְעוּ תִּהְיֶה נְתִינָה זֶה לָכֶם לְבְרָכָה, וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ אֵין זֶה לָכֶם כִּי אִם קְלָלָה — שְׂבָאֵמָצְעוּתָהּ יִתְקַנְאוּ בְּכֶם. הָאֲמוֹת וְיֹאבְדוּ אֶתְכֶם מִמֶּנָּה בְּנִקְמָה גְּדוֹלָה.

Not two gifts. One. If you listen, this Land itself is your blessing. If you don't, it is not merely that the blessing is withheld — the same gift becomes the instrument of the curse. And how? "The nations will grow jealous of you and drive you out of it with great vengeance."

He wrote that in 1742. Read the news.

Ever wonder why in the world the nations would be jealous of us? We have a homeland smaller than New Jersey, shared with Arabs and Christians, while every one of them already has a country of their own. Jealous of what?

The question has no rational answer, and that is exactly the point. This is not an argument. It is the curse of the parasha.

And the word jealous is the key. Rabbi Yitzchak's famous question at the very opening of the Torah (Rashi, Bereishis 1:1) makes this precise point: the Torah begins with Creation rather than with the mitzvot so that when the nations tell Israel "you are thieves, you conquered the land of seven nations," our answer is ready. And our answer is not "every people deserves a homeland." Our answer is: the whole earth belongs to Hashem; He gave it to whom He saw fit, and He gave this piece to us.

Because if we are here for the reason every other nation is on its land — a people needs a country — then we have entered a competition. We have become one more nation holding territory, and territory is precisely what nations fight over. If we are here as the people who carry the Torah, there is nothing to compete for. No nation can be jealous of a claim it cannot make.

So the only legitimate reason for us to be here is not that we are safe here as Jews. It is that we can live Judaism here, as Jews. So long as the State protects Judaism, the nations have no claim against us. The claim begins the moment the State is only protecting Jews.

You cannot judge Judaism by the Jews. And you cannot protect Judaism by protecting Jews. And here, G-d does not wait even a second to show it. Go back to the verse just before our parsha, at the close of Eikev, the one most people skim: אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ דֹרֵשׁ אֹתָהּ, תָּמִיד עֵינֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָּהּ, מְרִשִּׁית הַשָּׁנָה — "A Land that Hashem your G-d seeks out; the eyes of Hashem your G-d are constantly upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (Devarim 11:12).

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov opens Likutei Moharan I:187 with a pasuk most people read as a threat: וְלָךְ — "And Yours, Hashem, is kindness, for You repay a person according to his deeds" (Tehillim 62:13). Read that again, because it sounds backwards. Yours is



kindness — because You pay people back?
Where is the kindness in being paid back?

Rebbe Nachman: הִנּוּ שֶׁהוּא חֹסֵד גָּדוֹל מֵאֵת הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ שֶׁהוּא מְשַׁלֵּם לְאָדָם מִדָּה כְּנֶגֶד מִדָּה, שֶׁעַל יְדֵי זֶה הוּא מְבִין — לִפְשָׁשׁ בְּמַעֲשָׂיו וְלִידַע הַחֲטָא שֶׁפָּגַם בּוֹ וְלָשׁוּב בְּתִשְׁבּוּבָה — it is a tremendous kindness that He repays a person measure for measure, because through this the person understands to examine his deeds, to know the specific flaw he damaged, and to return.

That is the whole idea. Midah k'neged midah is not the punishment. It is the diagnosis. A consequence that bore no resemblance to the act would be pure pain — you would suffer and learn nothing. A consequence shaped like the act is a message. It is legible. It tells you where to look. A doctor who tells you that you are ill has given you fear. A doctor who tells you which organ has given you a path.

And then Rebbe Nachman says the line that changes how you understand living here:

אָדָּה דַּע, שֶׁעֶקֶר מֵה שֶׁמְשַׁלֵּם הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ מִדָּה כְּנֶגֶד מִדָּה הוּא בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל... כִּי שָׁם מְדַקְדְּקִין לְשֵׁלֵם לְאִישׁ כְּמַעֲשָׂהוּ, מִדָּה כְּנֶגֶד מִדָּה... וְעַל כֵּן הַיּוֹשְׁבִים שָׁם בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶם עַל הַרְבֵּי יוֹסְרוֹ, מִחֲמַת שֶׁמְמַהְרִין שָׁם לְשֵׁלֵם לְאִישׁ כְּמַעֲשָׂהוּ.

It is harder here. Not because we are loved less. Because the accounting is faster and the resolution is higher. Where His eyes are always on us, nothing goes unnoticed and nothing gets deferred.

And now the piece that should give you chills. Rebbe Nachman brings his proof from the most notorious phrase in the Torah about this Land — the report of the meraglim: הִיא אֶרֶץ יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הִיא "it is a land that consumes its inhabitants" (Bamidbar 13:32). That sentence destroyed a generation. It is the classic lashon hara on the Land. And Rebbe Nachman takes the word אֶרֶץ apart: its letters are the initials of כְּמַעֲשָׂהוּ לְאִישׁ תְּשַׁלֵּם — "You repay a person according to his deeds."

The meraglim were not lying. They were misreading. They correctly perceived that this Land holds you to account, that it does not let you coast. They looked at that fact — the exact same fact — and instead of "here, G-d is close enough to answer you immediately," they said "here, you get eaten."

Same Land. Same intensity. Same phenomenon. One reading is chesed. The other killed a nation in the desert.

Which is precisely what the Or HaChaim was telling us at the opening of our parsha: בְּרִכָּה וְקִלְקִלָה אֶת. Not two objects on two mountains. One single gift containing both — and which one it becomes is determined entirely by us.

So Zionism, as important as it is, is not yet Judaism. A country can and should be defended. That is what soldiers are for, and I will not say a word to diminish them; without them there is no Land we can call ours. Their courage is real and their danger is real. But a country is not the same as a Judaism. You can hold the ground and lose the reason you are standing on it.

That is what the yeshivos are for. The Rambam writes that Shevet Levi received no portion in the Land and does not go out to war like the rest of Israel, because they were set apart to teach, to carry the Torah, to be soldiers of G-d — and then he adds that it is not Levi alone: any person whose spirit moves him to stand and serve enters that category (Hilchos Shemitta v'Yovel 13:12–13). Chazal said it more bluntly: רַבָּנָן לֹא צָרִיכִי גִטְרוֹתָא — the scholars do not need the city's walls to protect them, because they are the protection (Bava Basra 7b).

So ask me again whether I am a Zionist. I will not answer with a position. I will answer with two questions, and I intend to answer both: What did I do this year for the Jews of Israel? And what did I do this year for Judaism in Israel?

FOR THE LOVE OF THE LAND

R' Shlomo Wolbe wrote a fascinating Sefer called המצוות השקולות, The seven Mitzvot that have

Equal Weight. Fulfilling each one of these seven Mitzvot is equal to fulfilling the entire Torah, all



of the 613. 1. Denying Avodah Zarah, 2. Wearing Tzitzit. 3. Shabbat. 4. Torah learning. 5. Brit Milah. 6. Tzedaka. 7. Living in Eretz Yisrael. These seven Mitzvot are important to remember, because they are the heavyweight ones.

We know that living in Eretz Yisrael has equal value to keeping all 613 from a passuk in our Parasha. Moshe relays G-d's message to His People. *כִּי אֶתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן לְבֹא לָרֶשֶׁת אֶת־הָאָרֶץ. וְאֶשְׁר־יָקֻמְךָ אֱלֹהֶיכֶם נָתַן לָכֶם וְיִרְשָׁתֶם אֹתָהּ וְיִשְׁבַּתְּמָהּ. For you are passing over the Jordan River to come and inherit the land that Hashem your G-d is giving you, and you shall inherit it, and you shall dwell in it. וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל־הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת־הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי. And you shall keep all of these statutes and laws that I am placing in front of you today.* From the flow of these pesukim, our Rabbis derive that living in Eretz Yisrael is equal to keeping all of the 613. (Sifri Devarim 29, Yalkut Shimoni Devarim 885) The flow of the pesukim implies that by inheriting the land, and by dwelling in the land, you will be keeping all the Mitzvot of the Torah.

R Wolbe writes that each and every one that is mentioned as the seven have something pivotal about them and correspond to the seven קדושות, the seven areas of holiness. The Mitzvah of Denying Avodah Zarah is the Mitzvah corresponding to your value system. Tzitzit corresponds to your memory, as the strings are meant to remind you of the 613. Shabbat corresponds to the holiness of time. Torah learning corresponds the holiness of knowledge. Milah corresponds to the holiness of desires. Tzedakah corresponds to the power of giving. And Eretz Yisrael, to the holiness of a place.

Now, there are many opinions about the mitzvah of living in Eretz Yisrael and what it means to us. For some reason, the Rambam does not mention it as one of the 613, although he wrote, *A person shall always live in Eretz Yisrael, even in a city that is all gentiles, and this is better than living out of E Yisrael, even in a city that is all Jews. Because anyone who leaves E Yisrael to go to out of E Yisrael – it is as if he is serving idols.* (Shoftim,

Melachim 5, 10) The Rambam seems to learn that the Mitzvah of living in E Yisrael is something that is incumbent on each and every Jew, not a mitzvah to the collective Jewish People.

The Ramban disagrees with the Rambam. He believes that living in Israel is a Mitzvah from the Torah that should be included in the 613, and it is learnt from the passuk *וְהִרְשַׁתֶּם אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְיִשְׁבַּתֶּם בָּהּ And you (plural) shall inherit the land, and you (plural form) shall dwell in it.* (Bamidbar 33; 53) The Ramban is bothered by the question why the Rambam does not mention this as a Mitzvah of the 613. And the Ramban believes that this Mitzvah is not addressed to the individual, but to Klal Yisrael, for the directive of this Mitzvah is written with the word “you”, in the plural.

There are various situations in which a person is not required to live in E Yisrael. I am not going to discuss this subject from either the halachic point of view or the consideration of hashkafa. I am just going to point out something that meant a lot to me, and a life lesson from this Mitzvah.

R Avigdor Miller pointed to something in the blessing we make immediately before Shema each morning that seems out of place. In the blessing, we ask for success in Torah learning and thank G-d for choosing us as His Nation to give us His Torah. And then, we ask Hashem to bring us back to His Land. What is the connection between coming back to The Land and the rest of the blessing, which is talking about Torah learning?

The answer R A Miller gave was very enlightening. We want Mashiach, we want Eretz Yisrael *“not to be able to eat pomegranates and dates and figs in Eretz Yisroel. We are asking for Moshiah in order to be able to sit and learn Torah successfully in Eretz Yisroel. And to learn Torah doesn't only mean to sit in front of the Gemara. It means to absorb all of the great Torah attitudes and ideals. And we want the best environment possible to grow great in. A plant has to have two things to grow. It has to have roots or a seed, and it also has to have the right environment surrounding it. Plants won't grow just in any*



climate. In certain climates, like in warm parts of the world, these plants will grow more successfully. Today, even if the seed is planted, we are lacking the environment. All around us is an avir of tumah. And therefore, it is very difficult today for a seed, a child, to grow successfully. However, when a person is Ashrei Yoshvei Veisecha – if he sits in the house of Hashem; whenever he has spare time, he remains long in the house of Hashem, so it's like sitting in Eretz Yisroel. Rabbi Yochanan was once told that in Bavel, there were some zekeinim who lived long. So he asked a kasha: How could they live in Bavel if it says in the Torah למען ירבו ימיכם על האדמה – if you'll serve Hashem, you'll live long al ha'adamah, you'll live long on the land in Eretz Yisroel. But in Bavel, how could they live long? So, they told him: No, the people there come early to the beis hakneses and they remain late in the beis haknesses. "Oh" he said, "Hainu d'ahani lei, that's what helped them." (Berachot 8a) The air of the beis haknesses is like Eretz Yisroel. So, if you are in a makom Torah, it's an atmosphere where you'll grow more successfully."

There is a rule I learnt about people and how they think. People do not think how they want to think. Their thinking is dependent on five S's. State of Mind. Structure. Social context. Story of life.

ELUL – TIME FOR A CHANGE

I apologize, but I can't make my point without first troubling you. Fold your arms. Now, open them. Now, fold them again. Now, notice which arm you "naturally" put on top of the other. Is it right on top of left or left on top of right? Now, switch. Fold your arms the opposite way from the way that you are used to. Feels strange? Welcome to change. Welcome to Elul.

The parasha in which G-d gives us choice coincides with the Shabbat before Rosh Hodesh Elul. Why? Because Elul is a time for change, and change begins with choice. Once, a long time ago, without too much thought, you decided which arm to put on top of the other, whenever you fold your

Scenario. The place where you are, the scenario in which you are, are pivotal to who you are and how you think. To how you serve G-d. To how you learn Torah, and what its words mean to you.

And this is why living in Eretz Yisrael can be so important. Because E Yisrael can be a place where religious Jews feel comfortable to live a life as religious Jews. And this is a heavy-weight Mitzvah, because where you are, your scenario, are so pivotal to what type of Jew you are, of how you believe. That is what E Y was all about. It was a place where it was easiest to serve G-d, without any distractions from the gentiles.

The Rambam writes that the greatest Rabbis would kiss the stones of E Yisrael and roll in its dirt at the border. (Melachim 5;11) As the passuk says, *The Land that YHVH your G-d looks after always: the Eyes of YHVH your G-d are on it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year.* (Devarim 11;12) Our Sages teach us, that someone who sins in E Yisrael – it is as if he is sinning in the Palace of The King. And someone who does a Mitzvah here, it is as if he did the Mitzvah in front of the Eyes of the King, in G-d's Palace! (Sefer HaCharedim 59)

arms. Ever since, you have continued to fold your arms like that, and now, it is "strange to change". It's awkward.

Sefardim say Selihot for forty days, because that's how long Moshe spent up in Heaven to get the second set of tablets, after the sin of the Golden Calf. We were granted the second set of tablets on Yom Kippur, as we received atonement. During those forty days, what did the Jewish Nation do in the desert, without a Torah to study? They probably did Teshuva. Repentance.

The hardest part of repentance is changing self-perception. In order to repent, to change, there are steps that you can't skip. First, you need awareness



of the present situation. Second, you need to choose and define what you want different in your life. You need to choose how you want your behavior and identity to “look”. Then, you need motivation. Motivation depends on three factors: knowing what to do differently, believing in change, and believing that you can do it. For forty days, the Nation in the desert needed to believe that after falling from such lofty angelic levels to idol worship, they could still change. It takes forty days to totally convince yourself that things can be done differently. Even though change may feel awkward at first, it can be achieved in forty days. If you fold your arms the new way forty times, in a week from now, you will probably, naturally, go back to your old way of folding your arms. But, if you changed the order for forty days, you have probably

changed it for life. Elul is 40 days. Only after 40 days from conception can an embryo, in the womb, be considered a living entity. If life in the womb ends before forty days, we do not relate to it as “death”. It takes 40 days to create a human. And, it takes 40 days to recreate a human. Choice, alone, is not realistically going to make the change, until you follow up on the choice for 40 days.

The reason why most people do not change is because they don’t understand that it takes forty days. And, when they fail to change, they think that they do not have choice. So, G-d reminds us, just in time, in Parashat Re’eh, that choice is ours, but it takes forty days. Purim is a time for happiness, Hanukah is a time to thank G-d for miracles, Tisha B’Av is a time to mourn. But Elul is a time to choose. Elul stands for opportunity.

THE ART OF FIGHTING THE YETZER HARA

The four parashiot of Elul have in them endless tools for change and Teshuva. Reeh – See that you have choice, more choices than you think. Shoftim-observe how much self-control you have and how honest and true to yourself you have been. Ki Tetze – Now, go out to war against your Yetzer Hara, your evil inclination; recognize its ways. And then, Ki Tavo- let the past fall behind, תכלה שנה וקללותיה, and start a new year, with new blessing.

The difference between a Tzaddik and a Rasha, says the Alter from Kelm, is what you imagine and how you imagine. The way to fight the Yetzer Hara is to use its own weapons against him. The strongest weapon of the Yetzer Hara is false imaginations and fears. Temptations of pleasure and pride are only able to capture us, once we use imagination to magnify the temptation, making it more attractive and powerful than it actually is. Fear of missing out, fear of change, fear of failure, fear of poverty, fear of retirement ... it is not that these things aren’t real issues, it is that the Yetzer Hara magnifies and blows them out of proportion.

So, we fight the Yetzer Hara with imagining, but imagining the truth. How powerful a Rosh Hashana

can be, how great the reward and punishment of the next world can be, how great I can be, if I just imagine, do my due diligence and trust in G-d. The first step of being a Torah Jew, the first law in Shulchan Aruch, is to imagine, wherever you are, whoever you are with or not with, שויתי לה' נגדי , I place and imagine G-d in front of me, present with me, “alive” with me. No matter where I am in the world, I am in the world, I am וקיים.

But the Yetzer Hara counter attacks with imagination: *You can't do this repentance thing! How many times have you tried to improve yourself, and you failed! You're broken down and tired of this self-improvement merry-go-round! How many times have you tried to rise up, like the waves, and you just came crashing down! You may be a failure, but you are not foolish enough to try improving again, for the thousandth time! You know you can't change!* He makes you ignore and forget your strengths. And when that doesn't work, when you actually get into the repentance zone, he makes you forget your weakness and imagine that you can do more than you actually can: *You can change, if you really want to. It won't be hard. You can change at the last minute.* He makes you bite



off too much, more than you can swallow, so that you have spiritual indigestion. He makes you overestimate what you can do in one year and underestimate what you can do in seven years.

Another tool of the Yetzer Hara is to start with something so small and seemingly insignificant, that before you realize it, it becomes something you can't stop. This is the lesson of the Ben Sorer U'moreh, which begins with a young boy going after worldly pleasures and continues with a person who will turn into an unstoppable beast. Parashat Ki Tetze introduces to us the war tactics of the Evil Inclination, how one thing leads to the next : marrying an Eshet Yefat Toar will lead to having a rebellious child.

To counter that, G-d doesn't ask us to change, but to change direction. No matter how far you have gone off the beaten path, the point when you realized that you are in the wrong direction is closer to the destination than the point that you started to go off in the wrong direction. All G-d asks from us is, פתחו לי פתח כחודו של מחט ואני אפתח, Open up even a tiny opening for Me, an opening so small like the sharp point of a needle, and I will open up for you an entrance like a hall. This is the lesson of the shape of the Shofar, that on one side, it is narrow, and on the other side, it is wide. Because all G-d wants from us, is to take the first step. Elul is called אֵלוּל because it stands for אני לדודי ודודי לי, I am to My beloved, and My beloved is to me. The month is not called Dalul, after the other passuk of Shir Hashirim, דודי לי ואני, My beloved is to me, and I am to Him, because G-d waits for us, to make the small change, to take the first step towards the relationship. שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשְׁקָכָה אֶלְיָכֶם

The best way to get ready for Rosh Hashana is to imagine how many things were decided upon, last Rosh Hashana. It's been a crazy year. Last Rosh Hashana was "heavy stakes", on a personal and a global level. A year of collapse in so many ways. Meron. Givat Zeev. Surfside. Everything we relied on: doctors, hospitals, justice, our votes in America and Israel, police enforcement – everything just seems to be collapsing. The trust in leaders, the

trust in the economy, the trust in "the system", whatever the system might have been. People are anxiety-ridden about how to be ready for the next "collapse", as we shift from second vaccine, to the third vaccine, to the unknown...

The Rambam tells us that no matter how saintly we are, every Rosh Hashana we need to blow shofar, to wake up and realize that we are spiritually sleeping. We forgot G-d, even if we trusted in Him. We forgot the truth, as we busied ourselves with unimportant things. Chasing after money we don't need, running after respect and honor that is, anyway, short lived, eating tempting food that is not even good for us, and wasting endless time which is life itself, justifying it by calling it "entertainment". (see Rambam Teshuva 3) This is the message of the Shofar, to simpletons and Chief Rabbis alike. The Shofar blowing is the trumpet blow as we crown G-d as King, at the beginning of the new year. By waking up from spiritual slumber, by searching for the truth, focused on self-improvement, as we crown G-d as the world begins anew each Rosh Hashana, just as G-d was King on the first day of creation.

Elul is time for war. Elul stands for אחת למעלה ושבע למטה One above, and seven below, the strange way the Kohen Gadol would count and track the sprinkling of blood on Yom Kippur. The Yetzer Hara comes from seven places, with its seven names. (See Succah 52b) He uses any possible way to trick you, to go against you ... but there is always the One Above. *Every day the Yetzer Hara tries to kill you, spiritually, and if G-d won't help you, you won't be able to withstand him* (Kiddushin 30b). But it also means that if we just stick to the truth, if we learn Torah, all the lies of the Yetzer Hara will fall by the wayside. The only way to Teshuva is through Torah learning. Onkelos ינקה לא ינקה says, if you learn My Torah, I will forgive your sins. If you do not, I will not forgive your sins. The Torah is the only vaccine against the Yetzer Hara, בראתי יצר הרע בראתי לו תורה. תבלין. If you learn Torah, you will not be given over into the hands of the Yetzer Hara. (Kiddushin 30b)



TZEDAKAH: HOW SMALL CHANGE CAN MAKE A BIG CHANGE

During my early days in Israel, a roommate and I were approached by a poor man as we were strolling down Meah Shearim Street in Jerusalem. The man stuck out a cup, which contained a few coins, and said, “*Shabbos Koidesh*.” He meant that he was collecting funds to purchase Shabbat food for himself and his family. I handed the fellow a shekel as my friend searched his pockets. All he could come up with, though, was a ten-agurot coin which he promptly dropped into the cup. But before we could move on, the man said, “Wait a minute!” and placed 50 agurot in the hand of my friend. “It looks like you need the money more than me, he explained.” Without further ado, he turned and walked away, leaving us in a mild state of shock.

Before offering a Torah perspective on responding to an outstretched arm and open palm (or cup), permit me to share several additional encounters with poor beggars in Israel. I will never forget a gentleman in his late sixties who would circulate in the study hall of the Mir Yeshiva in a black baseball cap with the word *SHVIGGER* (mother-in-law) embossed in large gold letters. Then there was the fellow who came around the yeshivah with a sign over his chest proclaiming in English – a language which he apparently did not understand – that he is “deaf, dead, and dumb.” I myself could only testify to his being deaf and dumb. A third fellow tells you jokes, and a fourth first tries to convince you to take a 250-shekel massage (as he shows you his degree), and then asks if you can at least spare a shekel to help him pay his psychologist.

At one point, I started to ignore these people because of the nuisance they frequently caused. Each encounter involved having to stop learning to search for a coin. But I began feeling uneasy about this approach, especially regarding those people who came around every week. After all, they were really only asking for half a shekel. Furthermore, I kept thinking of the classical image of one Jew putting a coin into the *pushke* at the end of the

outstretched arm of a fellow Jew. Even worse, I knew that there is a Torah prohibition concerning not giving anything at all: (דברים כ"ב:א-ג).

An insight in this week's parashah helped me rectify my actions and, ultimately, my perspective. The Torah tells us: *Give to him, and let not your heart turn evil...*— נתן תתן לו ולא ירע לבבך בתתך לו (דברים טו - י). The *Kli Chemdah* points to the doubling of the verb *Give* in the verse (נתן תתן), and explains it to mean that if one has trouble giving, he should give a little to the first one who asks, and another small amount to the next poor person... Eventually, he will be able to change his habit and give more generously. Indeed, this approach can help us become more generous and compassionate in other life areas as well.

Besides the benefit of “small change” ultimately leading to big change, there are other significant benefits hidden in the mitzvah of *tzedakah*. For one thing, the poor man gives the giver a change in perspective. The Torah tells us that there will always be poor people in the world. Why? Rabbeinu Bachye answers that a world with only rich people in it would fall apart economically: If an individual needed something from someone else, no-one would ever feel a need to sell, and the result would be that money would lose its value. Therefore, there must always be poor people. (*Chovat HaLevavot, Shaar HaBechinah*, Ch.5).

On the surface, this is a bit perplexing. Rabbeinu Bachye seems to be saying that the poor must suffer their entire life to facilitate a healthy economy for the rich. Indeed we find a similarly perplexing statement in the Talmud concerning poverty: Rabbi Akiva said that although G-d loves the poor, He allows them to suffer from poverty so that the rich should be saved from Hell when giving charity. (*Bava Batra* 10a) How can G-d allow the poor to live a life of suffering just to save the rich from suffering in the next world? Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler *zt"l* explains that we do not



appreciate just how great the merit of benefiting another human being actually is – and the poor person receives this merit!

It is told that when a poor man would knock on the door of Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer *zt"l*, he would jump up and run to get some money so that the poor man would not need to waste an unnecessary second. His students offered to do the mitzvah for the *Gadol HaDor*, or at least open the door and let the poor person in. Rabbi Isser Zalman declined, however, explaining that he owes a tremendous debt to the poor. In light of the fact that the existence of poor people is a Heavenly decree, he commented: “If not for this person being poor, then I might have to take his place. He is doing me a favor by filling that position in my stead.” (See *Devarim* 15:11.)

JUST ONE MORE PRAYER

A central theme of our daily prayers is the Final Redemption. Eight Berachot, three times a day, revolve around this subject. Reeh Nah, Teka B'shofar, Hashiva Shoftenu, Laminim Valamalshinim, Al Hatzadikim, Tishkon Betoeh, Et Tzemach and Retzeh. We implore G-d for mercy on Jerusalem each time we have a sandwich or doughnut, in the grace after the meal, and we even stress our agony over the loss of Jerusalem in Birkat Hamazon on Shabbat, despite the tranquility that Shabbat requires. Ignoring Jerusalem, the Temple, or the Mashiach is ignoring a central part of the prayers and a major theme of Judaism.

When Mashiach comes, and the Temple will be rebuilt, not everyone will be allowed inside. Only those whose thoughts were centered around Jerusalem, those who mourned, get an entrance pass. The first thing upon approaching the Heavenly Court each Jew is asked, *Did you anticipate the Final Redemption?* If not, you cannot get into Paradise. Why are our prayers and anticipation of the rebuilding of the Temple so central in Judaism?

The answer is that each prayer, of each person, is another step closer to the way things are meant to be. A King without a castle, a King without a

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When we meet a poor person, we sometimes hear a voice inside us saying: “Why doesn't he go to work and make money?!” or, “Surely, there are better causes than this...” Before listening to this voice, we would do much better to learn the laws of *Tzedakah* in detail and learn (or re-learn) all that *Chazal* have written about this mitzvah. It saves us from death, evil decrees, poverty, and *Gehinom*; and it brings us salvation, makes us better people, and unites us. And, as the prophet Yeshaya declared, Jerusalem will be rebuilt through charity (יְשַׁעְיָה א', כז).

Besides, it often only costs a shekel!

throne, is a King with a kingdom that is incomplete. As dedicated and loyal servants to G-d, this should be unsettling. The job of the Jew in this world is to build that kingdom of G-d. How? Just by sincerely asking G-d to allow the Final Redemption to happen. Each time we say Amen Yehei Shemei Rabba, *May the Great Name of G-d be blessed forever and ever*, we are pledging allegiance to that Kingdom. And each time we say those words by Kaddish in synagogue, G-d cries and wails, “Woe is to Me, that I allowed the gentiles to destroy the Temple, and exiled My Nation from the Land.”

We do not have the Temple, we do not have Mashiach – for one of two reasons. Either because we don't really want the Final Redemption, or because we do not believe that our prayers can make it happen. Noach was held responsible for the Flood,(the” flood of Noah”) because he did not pray to G-d to annul the decree. Why did he not pray? Because he did not believe that his prayers would have any effect. And, our Rabbis teach us, that every generation in which the Temple was **not** rebuilt is considered a generation in which the Temple was destroyed. We are held responsible.



If we pray for the Mashiah, with the belief that our prayers can bring him faster, and because we really want the Final Redemption, it will happen! Any

minute. Especially during these three weeks, let us at least try to have more concentration when we pray for Jerusalem.

REMEMBERING OUR MORTALITY:

AN EFFECTIVE “SELF HELP” TECHNIQUE

One of my rabbis recently flew to the United States to visit a student. While in town, the rabbi was asked to give a Torah class at the office of the student's father – a very hard-working, rich man who spends untold hours behind a big desk in a fancy office. Towards the end of the class, this busy man took out a bucket from under his big mahogany desk and put it on the table. He asked the rabbi to take a look inside. The bucket was full of dirt! The man turned to the rabbi and explained that whenever he feels good about making a great business deal, he picks up this bucket and says to himself: One day I will be buried with this bucket of dirt covering my body. It can happen any day, and when it does, I will leave all the cash behind.

After relating this story, my rabbi looked at me and commented: “I was shocked! I would never imagine a man in his position doing such a thing. Most people are afraid of death, and try to avoid the subject. This man actually felt happy reminding himself that one day it will all be over” because a reminder of death can actually give one the right mindset for life. The Ben Ish Chai finds this same concept hinted at in our *parashah*: (ראה אנכי נותן) – “See that I put before you today...” In other words, perceive and focus on the *today* that I am giving you. In order to deal with life from a proper perspective, we must stop and ask ourselves: “How would I conduct myself if today were to be my very last day.” This can give us the strength to deal with hardships and overcome them. This can also help us to not waste time on mundane things that are ultimately of very little importance.

The Ben Ish Chai's insight is particularly relevant to those of us who are living a life of plenty. The *yetzer ha'ra* (Evil Inclination) tries to take

advantage of this, and entices us to feel very proud of ourselves – to the point of haughtiness. The *yetzer ha'ra* knows that haughtiness can easily lead to the abandonment of G-d and His commandments. The best way to overcome this is by imagining that there is no more than “today” – that tomorrow is non-existent. By tomorrow, our soul might have left all our worldly possessions behind. As the Midrash puts it, when a baby arrives in this world, his fists are clenched. When he leaves the world, however, his palms are open (קהלת רבה ה,ב). What this means, symbolically, is that we all come into the world trying to grab whatever we can get our hands on; but when we die, we leave with nothing.

The same insight of the Ben Ish Chai can also help us in times of financial hardships. In fact, it dovetails with the teaching of our Sages in the Talmud: “Do not fret over tomorrow's worries because you do not know what tomorrow will bring. Maybe you will not even have a *tomorrow*; and by fretting over it, you may be fretting over a world that is not yours” –

(סנהדרין ק:;) אל תצר צרת מחר כי לא תדע מה ילד יום שמא למחר איננו וגממצא מצטער על עולם שאינו שלו

Why is it, by the way, that we are inclined to forget that death is inevitable, and that it can happen to any one of us at any moment?

The Chofetz Chaim explains that – at least emotionally – most people tend to feel that there is a *society* of people who die. It is made up of the elderly, the sick, and the unlucky. They belong to this select group who die, of which I am not a member. So while I may be aware of death, it doesn't apply to me. This mistaken perspective on death spawns a mistaken perspective on life. To



counter this, the businessman described above came up with a unique method to internalize death emotionally, on a daily basis, and put life's worries and challenges in the right perspective.

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Learning from the Dead

Another way for us to keep our priorities straight is to consider the meaning of a well-known halachah pertaining to the Jewish cemetery. A man is forbidden to walk in the cemetery with

his *tzitzit* strings outside his pants. This is because – on some level – the people buried there perceive that someone near them is fulfilling a mitzvah that they cannot. This is considered a slight. The Sages call it לועג לרש – *mocking the dead*. Note that although a few inexpensive *tzitzit* strings “bother” the dead, they are not in the least bit bothered if a visitor pulls right up to the grave in the latest Infiniti SUV, wearing a Canali suit, a Cartier watch, and talking on his Blackberry. Just thinking of this *halachah* can help us put things in proper perspective!

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