

# OHRNET

SHABBAT PARSHIOT NITZAVIM-VAYELECH · 25 ELUL 5767 · SEP 8, 2007 · VOL. 14 NO. 50

## PARSHA INSIGHTS

### UNDERSTANDING AND COMPREHENSION

*“It will be when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you, then you will take it to your heart... and you will return to the L-rd, your G-d and listen to His voice...” (30:1)*

The human mind is like a computer; it has many modes. There is a mode that perceives through ears like microphones and eyes like cameras; it senses movement through the inner ears and the skin; it senses heat and cold. The mind can understand what it is seeing/hearing/feeling. It can piece together a sufficiently accurate picture of reality to act with confidence. It may not be right all the time, but it's right enough of the time to steer the body through decades of existence.

There's another part to the mind, however; a part that takes individual pieces of information and processes them into a comprehensive whole — that converts understanding into comprehension.

The history of the Jewish People is written with our blood. We are a byword for exile and suffering. “The wandering Jew” “ghetto” and “genocide” are all words that have entered the *lingua franca* of the world courtesy of the Jewish People.

When you read the Torah's dire warnings of what befalls us when we break its eternal laws and compare

that to our blood-stained history, chills run down your spine.

On the other hand, the periods of great blessing of prosperity that Jewish People enjoyed in our Holy Land before the exiles must not be forgotten. Distant as they are from us, those were days of incomparable spiritual and physical bounty.

*“It will be when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you, then you will take it to your heart... and you will return to the L-rd, your G-d and listen to His voice...”*

What we know today, our comprehension of both the blessings and the curses of over three thousand of years of Jewish history, will eventually lead to a true return to belief and trust in G-d.

For the incontrovertible evidence of our anti-historical survival, that perspective of thousands of years of history viewed through the

reflection of the heart, yields a true perception of our destiny.

• Adapted from Rabbi Shimson Rafael Hirsch

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“ghetto” and “genocide” are all words that have entered the *lingua franca* of the world courtesy of the Jewish People.

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

### Nitzavim

On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers all the people, young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women, in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations yet unborn. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship because, in spite of having witnessed the abominations of Egypt, there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality. Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel which will result from failure to heed G-d's *mitzvot*. Descendants of that generation and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all — the Jewish People have forsaken the One who protects them in favor of powerless idols. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. However assimilated they will have become among the nations, eventually G-d will bring them back to *Eretz Yisrael*. Moshe tells the people to remember that fulfilling the Torah is not an impossibility; rather it's within the grasp of every Jew. The *parsha* dramatically concludes with Moshe comparing the Jewish People's choice to follow the Torah to a choice between life and death. Moshe exhorts the people to choose life.

### Vayelech

On the last day of his life, Moshe goes from tent to tent bidding farewell to his people, encouraging them to "keep the faith." Moshe tells them that whether he is among them or not, G-d is with them. He summons Yehoshua, and, in front of all the people, exhorts him to be strong and courageous as leader of the Jewish People. Thus, he strengthens Yehoshua's status. Moshe teaches the mitzvah of *hakhel*: Every seven years on the first of the intermediate days of Succot, the entire nation, including small children, is to gather at the Temple to hear the king read from the Book of Devarim. The sections read deal with faithfulness to G-d, the covenant and reward and punishment. G-d tells Moshe that his end is near, and he should summon Yehoshua to stand with him in the *Mishkan*, where G-d will teach Yehoshua. G-d tells Moshe and Yehoshua that after entering the Land the people will be unfaithful and worship other gods. G-d will then completely "hide His face," so that it will seem that the Jewish People are at the mercy of fate, hunted by all. G-d instructs Moshe and Yehoshua to write down a song — *Ha'azinu* — which will serve as "witness" against the Jewish People when they sin. Moshe records the song in writing and teaches it to *Bnei Yisrael*. Moshe completes his transcription of the Torah and instructs the *levi'im* to place it to the side of the Holy Ark, so that no one will ever write a new Torah Scroll different from the original, for there will always be a reference copy.

## ISRAEL Forever

### LAST SHABBAT OF THE YEAR

The last Shabbat of this year 5767, on the 25th day of the Month of Elul, is special in more than one way.

This is the date when G-d began His creation of the world we live in. (Adam was created on the sixth day which we celebrate as Rosh Hashanah.)

On the night following this last Shabbat of the year it is customary in Ashkenazic synagogues to initiate the Selichot prayers which carry on until Yom Kippur.

What is the connection between the last Shabbat of the year, the date of Creation and the beginning of Selichot?

The security of the world and the Jewish people in particular depends on the Selichot forgiveness we seek for our mistakes of the year coming to an end. And what better way to start the process of *teshuvah* return to G-d than properly observing the last Shabbat of the year as an investment in the peace and prosperity of Israel forever.

## THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

### "SELICHA" AND "SELICHOT"

The Israeli version of "Excuse me" and "Pardon me" familiar to westerners is "Selicha". There is an old joke about an American tourist to Israel who thought that the local resident was introducing himself when he said "Selicha" and responded with "Ginsburg from Chicago".

Seriously speaking it is incorrect when Jews speak of "saying Selichot" in these days before and in-between the Days of Awe. It is only G-d who is capable of saying "Selichot" as He forgives us for our mistakes of the past year. It is our job to express regret for those mistakes and to ask G-d to "say Selichot".

## PARSHA Q&A ?

### Nitzavim

1. Why did Moshe gather the Jewish People together on the day of his death?
2. Who are the wood-cutters and water-drawers mentioned in verse 29:10?
3. How do two parties “pass” into a covenant?
4. What is the connection between the verse “*Atem nitzavim*” and the curses in the previous parsha?
5. Why can't G-d disassociate himself from the Jewish People?
6. How many curses were listed in *Parshat Ki Tavo*?
7. Which two leaders followed Moshe's example and assembled the people at the end of their rule?
8. With whom did Moshe make the covenant and oath?
9. Why did the Jewish People see only idols of wood and stone in Egypt?
10. What is meant by the punishment of “adding drunkenness to thirst (29:18)”?

### Vayelech

11. How old was Moshe when he died?
12. Why was Moshe unable “to go out and come in” (31:2)?
13. What happened to Moshe's Torah knowledge on the day of his death?
14. How did Moshe foresee the relationship between Yehoshua and the Elders?
15. What did G-d tell Yehoshua concerning his relationship with the Elders?
16. How often does the *hakhel* (assembly of the Jewish People) take place?
17. Why does the Torah call the year of the *hakhel* the “*shemita* year”?
18. What sections of the Torah does the king read at the *hakhel*?
19. In what physical location does the king read at the *hakhel*?
20. Why were the men commanded to come to the gathering?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 29:9 - To initiate them into the covenant with G-d.
2. 29:10 - Canaanites who came to join the Jewish People.
3. 29:11 - The two parties place objects in two parallel lines and pass between them.
4. 29:12 - The Jewish People asked, “Who can survive such curses?” Moshe comforted them, saying, “You've done a lot to anger G-d, and yet — ‘*Atem nitzavim*’ — G-d didn't destroy you ...you're still standing before Him.”
5. 29:12 - Because He told them He wouldn't and because He swore to the Avot (Patriarchs) that the Jewish People would always remain His nation.
6. 29:12 - Ninety-eight.
7. 29:12 - Yehoshua and Shmuel.
8. 29:14 - With the people standing before him and all future generations.
9. 29:16 - Because these were exposed openly. The idols of gold and silver, however, were locked away by their owners for fear of theft.
10. 29:18 - Even unintentional sins will be considered by G-d as if they were committed intentionally. “Drunkenness” refers to sins committed unintentionally. “Thirst” refers to sins committed intentionally.
11. 31:2 - Exactly 120.
12. 31:2 - G-d did not let him because the power of leadership was being transferred to Yehoshua.
13. 31:2 - The well-springs of knowledge were closed up for him.
14. 31:7 - He foresaw that they would work in partnership.
15. 31:7 - That he alone would be the leader — for there can only be one leader in each generation.
16. 31:10 - Once every seven years, in the first year of the new *shemita* period.
17. 31:10 - Because the laws of *shemita* still applied to the harvest.
18. 31:11 - From Devarim: 1:1-6:9; 11:13-21; and 14:22-28:69.
19. 31:11 - On a wooden platform erected in the *azara*.
20. 31:12 - In order to learn.

- Suspicion of infidelity and its effect on the marriage
- The *ketubah* of a virgin and that of a widow
- The bloodless consummation and its causes
- Some etymological explanations and medical advice of Rabbi Chana of Baghdad and other Sages
- Conversion of a minor
- Which women are entitled to which sum of *ketubah*
- The *ketubah* of a daughter of a *kohen*
- Monetary dispute between man and wife, lender and borrower
- Status of child of woman suspected of illicit relations
- If a woman taken captive can marry a *kohen* after being freed
- When the identity of a girl's attacker is not known is she eligible to marry a *kohen*
- When the rule of deciding the status of someone or something based on majority probability applies
- Determining the status of a child found in a city populated by Jews and non-Jews

## A DIVORCE IN TIME

A woman who commits adultery is forbidden to both her husband and her partner in sin. The question then arises as to how King David could marry Batsheva when the simple reading of the text (*Shmuel II*, 11:2-3) indicates that he had relations with her while she was still the wife of Uriah.

Rabbi Shmuel Nachmeni solves the problem by revealing that everyone who went to battle for King David wrote a *get* (divorce document) to his wife before leaving home.

Rashi's explanation is that since David's soldiers were afraid that they might not survive the war and thus compel the widow to face *yibum*, they divorced their wives on the condition that if they did not return from the battlefield the divorce would take effect retroactively to

the day the *get* was given. Since Uriah did not survive the war his marriage had already been dissolved when David took her.

*Tosefot* challenges this approach and offers the opinion of Rabbeinu Tam that the *get* was not a conditional one but an outright dissolution of the marriage. The problem with this approach is that the *gemara* (*Bava Metzia* 59a) refers to David's action as relations with a "dubious married woman". If Batsheva had been properly divorced why should her status be in doubt? The answer given is that such divorces were given in secret so that no one should exploit the opportunity to marry the woman before her ex-husband returned to remarry her. Since the public was not aware of the divorce of Batsheva there was a suspicion that he was guilty of adultery even though this was not the case.

• *Ketubot 9b*

## WHAT THE SAGES SAY

Why is a widow called an *almanah*?

"Because the man who marries her is only obligated to obligate himself to a *manah* in her *ketubah* (as opposed to double that amount for a virgin)."

*Rabbi Chana of Baghdad - Ketubot 10b*

## THE UNBROKEN CHAIN

**C E. K. from Los Angeles, California wrote:**

*Dear Rabbi,*

*Ohr Somayach wrote the following in Ask the Rabbi:*

**“Our tradition is a faithful, unbroken chain dating back to Sinai. (The evidence for this is a topic for another discussion.)”**

*I have often debated this with my learned, pious Talmudic scholar of a cousin. The discussion usually starts with me saying: “How can you rely on information ‘passed down’ orally, when it’s impossible to even get a phone message communicated correctly?” My cousin usually replies that the information is ‘correctly passed down’ because the entire known world witnessed the event, or made the law, what have you, and thus everything witnessed is supported. Myself, I still am not convinced. So here’s one vote for opening of the discussion of unbroken chains of oral tradition. As usual, thanks so much for your service, and keep up the good work. Shalom*

Dear C. E. K.,

Because this is such a broad subject, I can only offer a partial answer in this short column. There won’t even be room for a joke (but keep your eyes open for a pun or two).

First let’s start with a fact everybody agrees upon: There exists today a group of people, the Jews, who claim the following: “3,300 years ago, millions of our ancestors experienced what they felt was G-d talking to them. We, their descendants, have an unbroken chain passed on through the millennia that tells us two things: (1) That the event took place, and (2) The contents of the message.” The Jews are the only people to ever make such a claim.

Let’s first look at point number one.

How can you explain a group of people who claim to be descendants of millions of people experiencing the splitting of the sea, the manna and the Revelation at Sinai? How did the first generation start believing it? A charismatic leader? A slowly evolving story? Mass hypnosis?

Could a leader rewrite the oral history of a people and get them to believe it happened to their own ancestors? Imagine Napoleon telling the French “In the year 750, G-d split the Rhine River for your ancestors, commanded them a set of all-encompassing laws, and they passed that experience down from generation to generation.” The people would say “What? Dad never told us that! Hey, Grandma, did your grandparents ever tell you about this?” Remember: We not only believe in the Exodus and Sinai, we also believe that we have an unbroken chain back to those events.

Or the slowly evolving story: The people ate sap from

bushes that grew in the desert, but used to say “G-d sent us food from heaven” because they wanted to express the idea that all nature comes from ‘Above.’ One day, Johnny comes home from kindergarten and says, “Dad, the teacher told us that food fell from the sky.” The father, reading a newspaper, grunts “Uh huh,” and Johnny grows up with a misconception. Eventually, Johnny’s misconception becomes the predominant belief. Slightly absurd. And what about Sinai? Was it really a volcano that ‘grew’ to become a mass prophecy of 613 commandments that we all agree upon?

Mass hypnosis? Martians? Now we come to a second problem. No matter what theory you concoct to imagine how such a belief got started, you must answer the following question: Why are we the only ones in history ever to make such a claim? Why, indeed, didn’t Napoleon create such a belief? Why didn’t Pharaoh or Hammurabi, Paul or Mohammed, Alexander or Julius, Lenin or Mao? They all could have ‘propheted’ greatly. No people, clan or country across the globe at any time in recorded history ever claimed that G-d convened their nation and spoke to them. Except us. Why?

Is it that the Jews were simply the most ignorant, superstitious, stupid and gullible people ever to walk the face of the earth? But then, having accepted this belief, they became the most scholarly, unyielding, skeptical people in the world, earning the title ‘People of the Book,’ surviving the ideological onslaughts of Christianity and Islam, giving their lives to pass on this belief, becoming a ‘light to the nations’ and spreading morality and monotheism to all humanity?

The Torah itself predicts that no one else in history will ever make a similar claim: “Inquire into the earliest days, the past, from the day G-d created people on the earth, and from one end of the universe to the other: Was there ever such a great thing as this, or was there ever even heard a claim like it? Did a nation ever hear the voice of G-d speaking from the midst of the fire as you heard, and live (to tell about it)? Or did G-d ever attempt to come and take a nation out from the midst of another nation with miracles, signs, wonders, and with open expressions of Divine might, and with great awe, like all that the L-rd your G-d did for you in Egypt in front of your eyes?” (Deuteronomy 4:32-34)

Now, how do we know the events and laws were transmitted faithfully? Well, we see Jewish communities dispersed across the globe for millennia: Europe, North Africa, Asia, Yemen, the Middle East. And although they had no central authority and limited means of communication, they all have the exact same Torah and the exact same oral explanations of it. (Obviously, there are some minor differences, but only the type you would expect. What’s astounding is how few there are.) Even our Torah scrolls agree to the very last word.

*continued on page six*

## MAKING A BREAKTHROUGH

**Question:** After reading your column of last week about the Chafetz Chaim's approach to dealing with Jews who resist efforts to persuade them to become observant, I was wondering as to whether you have some tips on making a breakthrough with someone who is not even ready to listen to you at all. What are the right things to do?

**Answer:** Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein, the rabbi of the Ramat Elchanan community in Bnei Brak, once encountered this problem when speaking to a paratrooper in the Israel army. When nothing seemed to arouse his attention the rabbi declared, 'I envy you!'

Taken by surprise at hearing such words from a rabbi,

the paratrooper asked for an explanation. "Did you ever hear of Rabbi Yonah of Gerunda?" began the rabbi. The answer was negative but indicated an increase in curiosity.

"He was one of the greatest ethicists of our people. In his writings he points out that when our Talmudic Sages state that death is an atonement for sins, the fear of death achieves the same objective. I see that you are wearing the emblem of the paratroopers which means that you have experienced the fear of death before every jump and have achieved atonement, which I envy."

This compliment achieved the desired breakthrough and a similar strategy may be what you need to achieve yours.

## LOVE OF THE LAND - THE PLACES

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

### THE SILOAM SPRING

A recent news item about Jerusalem's Mayor Uri Lupolianski's asking the Turkish government to return to Israel the ancient Siloam inscription called attention to the history of the tablet.

In *Divrei Hayamim II* (32:2-3) it is recorded that King Chizkiyahu ordered the stopping up of the springs around Jerusalem, which were the source of water for the city, in order to deprive the invading Assyrian army of Sancherib from making use of them. To make those waters still available for his people "he brought them straight down to the west side of the City of David" (*ibid.* 32:30).

Historians say that this refers to the 450-meter long tunnel that the king's workers hollowed out of bedrock. The Siloam inscription, named for the spring



whose waters flowed through this tunnel, records the dramatic moment when the two teams of excavators that dug in opposite directions met to celebrate the completion of the project.

The Siloam inscription was discovered in 1880 and taken by the Ottoman rulers to an Istanbul museum. Mayor Lupolianski asked the Turkish ambassador to Israel to arrange for the return of the historic tablet as a gesture of good will between allies. It should be noted that while the stopping up of the springs may have been a clever military strategy, Chizkiyahu was criticized by the Sages for taking such a drastic step rather than relying on G-d's promise (*Melachim II*, 19:34) that "I will defend the city to save it." (*Pesachim* 56a)

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Obviously, therefore, we have a remarkably faithful method of transmission. And the reason is also obvious: We never treated the Torah like a party-game or a 'telephone message.' Rather: "He heard it from his teacher 40 times." "One who studies a chapter 101 times is incomparable to one who studies it only 100 times" "His father left him hundreds of ships, hundreds of fields. but he never saw any of

them - rather, he traveled from teacher to teacher and studied Torah." "Rabbi Akiva studied 40 years, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai studied 40 years..."

The Talmud is replete with examples of the Jewish People's total dedication to Torah study, sometimes suffering even torture and death for it. It's easy to see how such a nation kept the message intact.

# Recipe for Long Life

RABBI MENDEL WEINBACH

**A**s we approach the High Holy Days when we repent and pray that we be judged by Heaven for life and well-being in the year to come, it is a good idea to include in our “New Year’s Resolutions” a greater commitment to synagogue attendance. In the August 22 issue of the Jerusalem Post there appears the following JTA report:

*“A Hebrew University of Jerusalem study suggests that people who attend synagogue regularly live longer than those who do not.*

*Prof. Howard Litwin of the University’s Israel Gerontological Data Center studied 5,000 Israelis aged 60 or older over a seven-year period.*

*He compared various factors influencing their longevity. His findings, published in The European Journal of Aging, showed a death rate 75 percent higher among those who did not attend synagogue regularly.*

Litwin suggested several reasons: Faith may help people survive psychological pressure better; observant Jews walk to the synagogue on Shabbat, thus maintaining an exercise routine; and a supportive community helps people live longer.”

All of the reasons given by Prof. Litwin for the longevity of synagogue attenders are true but he left out the

most important one – the reward which Heaven grants to those who regularly come to the synagogue to pray to G-d.

The Talmud (*Mesechta Berachot* 8a) relates that when Rabbi Yochanan, who taught Torah in Eretz Yisrael, was told that there were Jews in Babylon who reached old age, he greeted this report with wonder. In the Torah’s promise of longevity for fulfilling the *mitzvot* we are told that this is “in order to increase your days and the days of your children upon the Land which G-d swore to give to your ancestors” (*Devarim* 11:21). If long life is conditional on living in Eretz Yisrael, he asked, how can it be attained elsewhere?

Only after inquiring about the behavior of those elderly Babylonian Jews and learning that they came early to the synagogue and left late was the mystery solved. It is this merit of synagogue attendance, concluded Rabbi Yochanan, which enables them to live so long.

The synagogue attenders among those 5,000 Israelis studied by the professor have not only the merit of living in Eretz Yisrael but also that of regularly visiting the House of G-d to enable them to live longer than those who fail to take advantage of this recipe for long life.

May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.

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