

PENINIM ON THE TORAH

PARSHA BOOKLET

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PARASHAT NETZAVIM

And you will return unto Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice, according to everything that I command you today. (30:2)

People repent for a number of reasons. A desire to return to one's source - not to run away from suffering - catalyzes true long-term repentance. Often one seeks to escape from a difficult situation and start his life over again. While this may be a shadow of repentance, it lacks the element of sincerity. One can achieve true repentance when he understands that he has strayed from Hashem, his Creator, his G-d, his Heavenly Father, and he now wants to return home. Hashem welcomes him, embracing his efforts. The term teshuvah conjures up the connotation of repentance from wrongdoing and grievous sin. This image is not necessarily present in the wider pictures, as the following incident demonstrates.

Rav Saadia Gaon, leader of Babylonian Jewry in the tenth century, was once seen crying bitterly. He was heard declaring that he must do teshuvah; he must repent immediately. Those who observed this spectacle wondered what kind of sin this great sage could have committed. He was an individual of impeccable character who lived life to the fullest extent in accordance with what the Torah dictates. If he was guilty of sin, what can we say? One of the spectators gathered the courage to approach Rav Saadia and question him. Rav Saadia explained, "It is not only for our sins that we must do teshuvah. We must repent for our mitzvos as well." He explained that he had once visited a Jewish community in a distant land. Seeking to conceal his identity, he sat in the back of the shul and made sure not to call attention to himself. He spent a few days at the home of a very hospitable man who treated him with the same cordiality that he would any other guest. After awhile, his identity was revealed, and people came flocking in droves to his host's home. Everyone clamored to speak and consult with the gadol ha'dor, leader of the generation. Realizing now who his distinguished guest was, his host was extremely apologetic for not having treated Rav Saadia with greater reverence. He wept uncontrollably, begging forgiveness for not having displayed greater honor than he did.

Participating in this experience caused Rav Saadia to think about his own relationship with Hashem. With time, we develop a deeper recognition of Hashem as we learn to acknowledge the awesomeness of His Presence - more and more. Thus, even if we have meticulously kept all of His commandments, we feel a greater sense of sorrow at not having done more and better. We should have been more diligent. We should have shown greater reverence. Given what we know now, our original actions seem to be but a feeble attempt at serving the Almighty. Consequently, there is no act that

cannot be improved by teshuvah, because with every mitzvah, with every day, our awareness of Hashem becomes more profound. This is especially true of one who has experienced a miracle, such as surviving a grave illness, or emerging from a serious accident without sustaining severe injury. He now knows more, and, therefore, must do more. This obligates him to repent.

The process of teshuvah is a generative one as it recreates the individual and transforms him into a new being. Horav Shlomo Freifeld, zl, cites the Rambam in Hilchos Teshuvah 2:4, who posits that a person who does teshuvah should give himself a new name. He is a new person. Teshuvah cleanses the impurities and corrects the defects in his life. As the generative force of teshuvah accelerates, the defects and impurities disappear. Teshuvah is more than an act of piety. It is a means of drawing on the incalculable creative power that resides in the wellsprings of the cosmos. To paraphrase Rav Freifeld, "If a person can harness the generative force and renew himself instantaneously, then it is never too late. Try, and -- if you fail -- try again. You can always come back."

This spark, this deep-rooted desire to return, exists in the hearts of all Jews. For some, it is buried deeply; for others, it is buried very deeply, but it exists. This is why, claims Horav Mosh Shternbuch, Shlita, that one who repents is - and should be - called a chozeir biteshuvah, rather than the popular term, baal teshuvah. One who returns is chozeir, he comes back through teshuvah. He is really only restoring his soul to its true, natural inclination.

The concept of teshuvah is comforting and encouraging, for no matter how deep one has descended into the abyss of sin, regardless of how far he has distanced himself from a life of Torah and mitzvos, he can return, and, when he does, the Almighty will welcome and forgive him. There is no such thing as having gone too far, since teshuvah helps us to erase the past and start over again.

Why do people not take advantage of this unique Heavenly gift? First, when we take the two requisites for teshuvah into consideration, we might understand that these two activities may actually be, for some, serious impediments to teshuvah. As his first step towards a meaningful way of life, one must renounce a regrettable past. This part of the "turning" process is integral to teshuvah. For many people, these two tasks seem impossible. To concede that one is imperfect, that the lifestyle he has previously led, at best, lacks meaning is a difficult pill to swallow. This renunciation, coupled with the need to change -- at times, drastically-- can be a mountain too high to scale. After all is said and done, when that feeling of discomfort with one's life - regardless whether it is sinful or pious - arises, it is the first step on the road to "turning."

Teshuvah is a lengthy process, because, in effect, it has no clear end. One can always be better. One must always strive for perfection. With each ascension on the spiritual ladder, the individual realizes from where he is leaving and how far he must go. Each subsequent moment of change throughout life becomes another rung on the ladder, part of the unfolding of the initial inner resolve to make a turn. It may not be easy, but standing still is not different than falling downward.

Rav Shternbuch addresses another impediment to teshuvah: complacency. Some say they understand the need for returning; they recognize that the life they lead leaves much to be desired. They ask, however, what is the rush? Why today? Tomorrow will be just as good. A young person will especially want to push off until tomorrow what he should be doing today. Time does not carry the same level of importance for the young as it does for the old. They do not realize that the dirtier a shirt becomes, the more difficult it is to clean it. One who spends more time immersed in the filth will find it increasingly difficult to wash away the stains.

The individual must take another concept to heart. Every hirhur teshuvah, thought of repentance, is a Heavenly message. It is Hashem's subtle reminder to get his act together, to turn his life

around. If he ignores his Heavenly messages, he is wreaking enormous damage upon himself, which later on may be hard to repair. Therefore, as soon as he finds his conscience gnawing at him, he should seize the moment - while it is there.

Hashem knows that one does not become a baal teshuvah overnight. He knows the difficulties encountered in attempting to change habits that have become a way of life. What He does want, however, is for the individual to be chozeir biteshuvah, to turn and begin the process. The entire process takes a lifetime, but the actual decision to "turn" takes very little, and it will probably be the most compelling decision of his life.

And you should choose life. (30:19)

Bechirah, the ability to choose between right and wrong, is a unique gift which Hashem granted to man. While the actual determination remains in our hands, the Torah has "suggested" that we should choose a life of Torah. Horav Nossan Wachtfogel, zl, observes that the direction of one's life is ordained by one's choices. In a profound understanding of this concept, the venerable Mashgiach teaches us that choice is everything. It is all encompassing. One who opts for the path of the righteous, who chooses to do good, is considered a good person. The sins that he commits do not detract from his spiritual standing. He will, of course, pay for his sins, but he is a good person who just happened to sin. One who chooses the path of evil, becomes "registered" as a bad person. The mitzvos that he performs certainly earn him a reward, but as long as his choice is for evil, he is an evil person who "just happened" to perform mitzvos. It all depends on his choice.

Furthermore, this selection is not a one-time deal. His personal status changes every time that he makes a choice. A person is judged commensurately with his spiritual standing at that time. Hence, one who chose life will be viewed as a tzaddik, righteous person, who happened to sin. Woe is he who ignores the Yom HaDin, Day of Judgment, and chooses evil, thinking that he can get away with it. The foundation of his judgment is based upon the choices he has made. Therefore, a person should be sure to make the correct selection - each and every time, because we never know when Hashem is judging us.

You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d. (29:9)

The Midrash notes the juxtaposition of Parashas Netzavim on the previous parsha, Ki Savo, which enumerated the ninety-eight curses that would serve as punishment for he who transgressed the Torah. When Klal Yisrael heard these terrible curses, their faces became green and they asked, "Who is able to withstand such curses?" Moshe Rabbeinu began to appease them, explaining, "You have angered Hashem numerous times, yet He has not destroyed you. Indeed, you are standing before Him today." A number of questions regarding this Midrash should be addressed. First, why did their faces turn pallid due to the number of curses? Hashem could easily accomplish a devastating punishment with even one curse. We either listen to Him, or we do not. If we are cognizant of His mitzvos and we observe them, we have nothing to worry about. If, however, we do not listen, then there is no difference whether it is ninety-eight curses or one curse. The effect is equally destructive. Second, when Klal

Yisrael stood at Har Sinai and accepted the Torah, they were basically told that non-observance was not an option. If they observed, they would be rewarded. If they reneged, they would be punished. They did not seem to be impacted to the point that their faces turned pallid with fear. What had occurred now that had created such a change in their attitude?

Horav Nosson Ordman, zl, cites the Talmud Chagigah 5A, which relates that when Rabbi Yochanan would read the pasuk in Devarim 31:17, "And I will conceal My face from them and they will become prey, and many evils and distresses will encounter it," he would cry and say, "A slave whose master creates for him evils and distresses, is there any hope for him?" What is the meaning of this pasuk, and what prompted Rabbi Yochanan to react so intensely to it?

Horav Leib Bloch, zl, explains this with a powerful analogy. If a king were to send his trusted servant on an important mission, there is no doubt that the servant would do everything within his power to carry out the mission to its fullest and to achieve total success. This would be especially true if the king gave an added incentive, "if you fail, you will be executed." Nonetheless, the servant would always have in the back of his mind the notion that his king is a kindhearted and compassionate human being. Even if the servant were to err, he would know he could count on the king's mercy that the punishment would not be carried out.

This situation would be altered greatly if the king sent along guards to carry out the execution immediately if the servant had failed. This would certainly add to his trepidation. Knowing that he could not rely on the king's compassion but, instead, having to appeal to the guard's sense of humanity and mercy, would raise his fear level a few notches. As severe as the punishment may be, there was always a degree of hope in the back of his mind. Maybe he could convince the guards to overlook his error.

What if his mission was such that if he failed, however, then the actual object that he was working on would destroy him? For instance, if he were told to dismantle a bomb and, if he failed, the bomb would explode. There would be no recourse, no option for appeal. He either succeeded, or he would perish. There was no king to appease, no guards to ask for clemency. If he failed, he would die. Obviously, under such circumstances, the servant would be filled with overwhelming fear and trepidation.

The Telzer Rav explains that regarding sin, the punishment lies within the sin itself. The evil, the poison that will blemish and eventually destroy a person's neshomah, soul, is inherent in the aveirah, sin. The sin that he commits will itself be the precursor of evils and distresses, just like the servant who must dismantle a bomb. If he fails, he dies. The punishment for a sin is another sin, for sin leads to sin, and this path leads to ultimate ruin.

Likewise, when one performs a mitzvah, when he listens to Hashem, the positive effect on the entire Creation is awesome. It is an immediate response to listening, as well as an immediate reaction to not listening. We understand now why Klal Yisrael's faces turned pallid when they heard the many curses. It was not the number that frightened them, nor was it the idea of punishment. What scared them was the realization that there was an immediate connection between sin and punishment. There was no medium, no go-between, no appeal. If they sinned, they created ruin for themselves and for the world. This awareness can certainly create overwhelming emotional distress.

You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d. (29:9)

The commentators address the meaning of the word "today." They explain that "today" is every day. We are to stand before the Almighty on a daily basis and accept the Torah with renewed vigor as we originally did at Har Sinai. In an alternative exposition, the Likutei Torah posits that hayom, "today," is a reference to the most auspicious day of the year: Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, when we all stand before the Almighty to be judged for our deeds of the past year and to receive the decree for the upcoming year. We stand upright, confident and positive that we will emerge triumphant on this holy day. How does one stand before Hashem on this most decisive day? What "position" should one maintain as he stands in judgment before the King of Kings?

In the Mishnah Rosh Hashanah, Chazal teach us: "On Rosh Hashanah, all who walk the earth pass before Him like bnei maron, young sheep." This refers to the way young sheep pass through a narrow opening in the corral to be counted for the purpose of being tithed. Chazal add two alternative explanations for bnei maron. One interpretation is like maalos bnei maron, a narrow pass on a high mountain which allows for only one person to go through at a time. In another interpretation, bnei maron are soldiers who file by individually before the king. We must endeavor to understand the distinction between these three interpretations. Is there really a difference how we pass before Hashem?

Horav Shabsai Yudelewitz, zl, compares this to three types of people and their individual perspectives on the judgment they are to receive on Rosh Hashanah. He cites the following mashal, analogy, from Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl. A certain merchant went to the market to purchase merchandise for resale. He took with him two million ruble, some of it his own, with the remainder being money from various investors. Hashem was with him, and he succeeded in purchasing an impressive amount of merchandise at a very reasonable price. This would incur a tremendous profit for him and his investors. All he had to do now was bring it home. He rented a large wagon and a driver. He was not, however, prepared to pay the unreasonably high tariff demanded by the customs inspectors at the border. Therefore, he decided to return home through a somewhat difficult and dangerous route that was seldom traveled and, thus, was basically free from the border patrol.

The wagon driver that he had hired was an expert who showed no fear of the danger that might confront them. They left at night under the cover of darkness, in order not to arouse any attention as to their intentions. It would take a few days to return home. Understandably, the merchant was nervous from the moment of departure. He had much to lose, much more than the wagon driver. This was the scenario on the wagon: The driver was calm and relaxed, while the merchant was a basket case. "Why are you so nervous?" the wagon driver asked. "The earliest possibility of danger is not for three more days. Relax!" His words had no effect on the merchant, who was becoming increasingly agitated with each passing mile. Finally, as they were getting closer to the border, the wagon driver himself started to show signs of stress. Little beads of sweat began to appear on his forehead, and his voice became more sullen as they neared the moment of truth. Suddenly, the merchant asked the driver, "Why are you so nervous? What do you have to lose? I have everything to lose. What is your excuse?"

"Do you think horses grow on trees?" the wagon driver replied. "If I get caught, I will lose my business. My horses are my only source of income." As they approached the border, all was quiet; the merchant was mumbling Tehillim to himself; the wagon driver was sweating profusely; this was the moment of truth. Suddenly, the horses begin to neigh at the top of their lungs. Of all times, now at the most critical point in the trip, they had to create a disturbance. They were horses, however, and they did not realize what there was to lose.

The analogy is very apropos. There are three levels of preparation for the Day of Judgment, each dependent upon one's depth of understanding of the proceedings and what he might lose. The first

group are individuals who fear Hashem, whose piety and virtue is their hallmark. They begin to fret from Rosh Chodesh Elul. The moment the shofar is blown, they are acutely aware of the approach of the Yom HaDin, Day of Judgment. They understand what is at stake and how much they have to lose, similar to the soldier who files before the king for inspection and approval after much preparation and training. He realizes how meticulous he must appear. He is sure to come well- prepared.

Members of the next group do not manifest any anxiety until they are on the road for awhile. As Rosh Hashanah approaches, they begin to get their act together and demonstrate some outward signs of concern. They are like the wagon driver who has little to lose and shows it. Only when the border comes into his immediate sight does he become anxious. Like those who climb up the mountain, they manifest no fear until they reach the narrow pass that permits only one person at a time to pass through.

There is, however, yet another group. This group sleeps through Elul, and makes a farce out of Rosh Hashanah; it is all meaningless to these individuals. They simply have no clue what is at stake. Are they different than the senseless horses who pick the most inopportune time to announce their arrival at the border? These people are like the young sheep who pass through the narrow pen. Every tenth one is marked. They have no clue why they go through or why they are marked. When they discover the reason, it is too late. Regrettably, there are those among us who act like those young sheep. By the time we wake up, it is too late to do anything about it, and, instead of making a last resort attempt at salvaging what we have lost, we go back to sleep.

As we approach the Day of Judgment, we should remember what we have to lose and decide what we should do to prevent us from incurring this loss.

You are standing here today, all of you... the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers... for you to pass into the covenant of Hashem, your G-d, and into His imprecation... in order to establish you as a people to Him. (29:9,11,12)

This is not the first time that the Jews entered into a covenant with Hashem. Har Sinai demonstrated a powerful commitment. What innovation did this new covenant that took place in Arvos Moav reflect? Was it really necessary? Furthermore, why does the Torah emphasize the various people that comprised the assembly and their individual positions in life? The Ohr Ha'Chaim Hakadosh teaches us a fundamental lesson to be derived from this pasuk. During the first covenant at Har Sinai, each member of Klal Yisrael personally committed him/herself as an individual to accept and carry out the mitzvos of the Torah. There was no collective responsibility, however, to see to it that one's friend or neighbor would also follow the Torah's imperative. In contrast, in Arvos Moav they accepted the responsibility as a nation, as one people committed to Hashem's Torah.

Let us ask: Is there really a difference if the Torah is accepted on an individual basis or on a collective national basis? As long as everybody accepts and is committed to the Torah, what is the difference on what basis it was accepted? There is a compelling difference. As long as the nation of Klal Yisrael was together in the wilderness, in an environment that was -- for the most part -- spiritually pristine and conducive to growth, there really was no difference in the manner of acceptance. As the people were on the verge of entering Eretz Yisrael and were about to move apart to live among others,

it was essential that a unifying umbrella be in place to protect their collective spiritual future. Who was going to be their spiritual areiv, guarantor? Who would see to it that they took care of one another?

Enter the new covenant at Arvos Moav. This was a covenant that demanded of each individual Jew to commit to a collective responsibility, in which he would see to it that not only he was committed, but his friend would also maintain his commitment. No longer was Torah observance an individual obligation. It now became a collective responsibility. I am no longer simply a Jew. I am a member of Am Yisrael! Kol Yisrael areivim zeh la'zeh, "All Yisrael is responsible for one another" means that if one Jew desecrates Shabbos, he is threatening the entire Jewish family. It is my responsibility to reach out to him and to set him straight. If my neighbor reneges on his responsibility toward properly educating his children, I must do something about it. It is no longer "him" or "them." It is "me" and "us."

Furthermore, when Moshe Rabbeinu declared the words, "In order to establish you as a people to Him," he set a new and unique standard for nationhood. Unlike other nations, whose national structure is based on language, geographic proximity, or ethnic culture, the Jewish nation is bound by its Torah.

Rav Saadia Gaon says, "Yisrael is not a nation without its Torah." Two hundred and ten years slaving for Pharaoh, followed by forty years of journeying together in the wilderness, did not create our nationhood. It was only in Arvos Moav, when we accepted upon ourselves the collective responsibility to observe the Torah, that we became a nation.

This is the reason that those assembled are announced according to their individual station in life. We cannot hold everyone to the same level of responsibility. He who is on a lower rung of the ladder of influence has a diminished responsibility towards others. Some are responsible for their homes; others for their neighborhood; still others for their communities; and then there are the gedolim, Torah leaders, who carry the entire national responsibility on their shoulders. The eternal nature of Klal Yisrael is concretized with this covenant. An individual might lose his way over time. He might be confronted with powerful challenges to his faith which he alone cannot handle, but the nation, Am Yisrael, will never be lost. It will last forever.

You are standing today, all of you... not with you alone do I seal this covenant... but with whoever is here, standing with us today... and with whoever is not here with us today. (29:9,13,14)

Rashi explains that the statement, "Whoever is not here with us today," is a reference to future generations. His words are supported by the Midrash Tanchuma which states that the neshamos, souls, of all Jews were present at the making of the covenant. While they were not there physically, they are considered "with us today," albeit not "standing with us today." This is one of the most difficult concepts in Jewish theology to comprehend. If we are to understand the Midrash literally, it was our souls - not our bodies - that accepted the Torah. If so, how could an oath taken by our souls be binding?

In Forever His Students by Rabbi Boruch Leff, a collection of essays based upon the talks of Horav Yaakov Weinberg, zl, the Rosh Hayeshivah explains that the Midrash does not mean that we are committed to the Torah because we personally made an oath. This cannot be, since we, in our present corporeal forms, were not there. Furthermore, while it may be true that in some cosmic way our souls accepted the oath, that would not carry weight for us. The Midrash is saying that our generation was at Har Sinai because of our connection with the original generation of Jews who stood at Har Sinai. Our

people comprise one continuous entity that has existed throughout history. While the faces and bodies may have changed, the entity of Am Yisrael, the Jewish nation, has not. It exists forever and we today, who are a part of this glorious nation, were there then through the medium of our ancestors.

This idea can be compared to the regenerative process which affects every living organism. If one were to break down any living organism scientifically into individual cells, he would discover that over time the original cells die and new ones grow in their place. Indeed, not one cell which had comprised the organism's physical makeup at birth remains present as it ages. Hence, when we look at an older animal, we see a structure of cells totally different and distinct from with which it was born many years ago. Yet, this is the same animal, although its cells have been rejuvenated.

A parallel holds true for the Jewish nation. While individual generations of Jews have passed from this world, in a manner which is similar to the death of individual cells of an organism, they are replaced with new generations. Am Yisrael, like the organism, continues on. Only its individual people change. Our nation was present at Har Sinai and accepted the Torah. It is the same nation that lived in the time of the Bais Hamikdash and through the Holocaust. The people have changed, as the generations have passed on.

Returning to our original question: Did we accept the Torah at Har Sinai? The answer is contingent upon whether we are perceived as individuals or as a collective nation. Certainly, we are all part of the one great and glorious organism that comprises the Jewish nation. As members of Klal Yisrael, we were there, and we responded, "Yes!"

And you will return unto Hashem, your G-d. (30:2)

The first step in performing teshuvah, repentance, is perhaps the most difficult. One cannot repent until after he has recognized and acknowledged that he has erred. To recognize one's guilt, to concede that one has erred, that he has wronged Hashem, is a compelling act. One cannot engage in returning to Hashem, however, until after he has conceded that he did something wrong. Even the concession itself must be weighed carefully and carried out with utmost integrity. Let me explain. Sin, for the most part, can be broken down into three categories. The actual act of sinning is a form of challenge to Hashem's Divine authority. This challenge can occur in any of three instances.

First, is the pasha form of sin. One simply acts however he pleases, manifesting a form of treachery and betrayal against the Almighty. Hashem has instructed him to act in a certain manner and he has rebelled against the instructions. He broke the rules, because he does not care. I would not go as far as to say that the individual has gone out of his way to defy Hashem. No. He simply does not care. He does whatever he wants, and Hashem's demands are of no concern to him.

Second, is the individual who truly loves Hashem and wants to carry out His mitzvos. He seeks to conform to his mandate and follow all of the rules. There is, however, one problem. He is weak. Temptation grabs hold of him and slices through him like a hot knife through butter. He is overruled by his desire to steal, to lust, to disparage another person. He knows he is wrong, but he cannot control himself. This is referred to as avon.

The third form of sin is cheit. It is an unintentional, undeliberate act of transgression. Either the person does not know it is wrong, he forgot, or he is such a creature of habit that he did not think before he acted sinfully. He was careless and inadvertent, but no less a sinner, because the truly committed

person does not forget, does not act impulsively.

While a person may concede to his sin, he might conveniently assert that an activity that should be rendered an avon is really a cheit, or that a clear act of rebellion, a pesha, was nothing more than an act of forgetfulness. A person must not only confess his sin, he must likewise own up to the form of sin that he has committed. His repentance must be in accordance with his sin. To take this one step further, we suggest the following: When a person sins, he moves away from Hashem. His transgression distances him from the Almighty. A sin is an act of imperfection. Hashem, Who is perfect, cannot "tolerate" an imperfection. Thus, by his actions, the sinner removes himself from Hashem's circle. Teshuvah is the process by which he returns to that circle, because Hashem has allowed for a system to exist in which a sinner can correct the imperfection and return to Him. This process works only when the person who is repenting does so correctly and for the appropriate form of sin. If, for example, he performed a pesha and repents for an avon, his teshuvah is lacking, and he still remains distant from Hashem. Thus, recognition is the first step on the road to return.

And you will return unto Hashem, your G-d. (30:2)

The idea of returning to Hashem, to being welcomed home, regardless of what act we have committed, is truly incredible. The thought that, although I have sinned and, thus, have estranged myself from Hashem's proximity, I can now return and be accepted is thought-provoking. Everything aside, it should engender a tremendous outpouring of hakoras hatov, gratitude. One who has distanced himself, returned, and has been accepted should be the happiest person alive. It should be no different than he who had been deathly ill and literally has returned from the dead. His gratitude should be overwhelming. His appreciation should be boundless. It should, but is it? How many of us defer to human nature and quickly forget where we were and what could and should have happened, but did not. Hashem brought us back, just like He brought the baal teshuvah back and accepted him. Now, our sense of gratitude should be constant.

I was inspired with this idea from a story I recently read in Rabbi Yechiel Spero's book, *Touched By A Story 3*. The story is about an elderly Russian melamed, Torah tutor, Rav Mordechai Leib Hakohen Kaminetzki, zl, who could be seen walking the streets of Yerushalayim in the wee hours of the morning on his way to the Bais Hamedrash. This was the early part of the twentieth century, and street lighting was not yet in vogue. As he trudged down the dark streets, lantern in hand, he was an amazing sight. He continued his early morning routine, despite the weather, and regardless of whatever violence reigned in the neighborhood. He maintained his schedule and continued to be the first one in the bais hamedrash - every single day.

Rav Mordechai Leib was no longer a young man. His routine continued on, even as he celebrated his 96th birthday! While some thought he was simply an old man who could not sleep, Rav Mordechai Leib himself would reiterate that he would have loved to get back under his warm blanket for a few more hours of sleep. Why did he do this? If he could sleep, and he wanted to sleep, why did he not sleep? It was Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, who finally approached him and asked for an explanation. His reply is inspirational and should galvanize us to act similarly.

Rav Mordechai Leib explained, "Every night, I go to sleep. The first time I wake up, regardless of what time it is, I do not go back to sleep. Instead, I get up and go to the bais hamedrash. I feel it is only right that I do this. Think back to the dor hamidbar, the generation that went through the

wilderness. After the decree that they would not enter Eretz Yisrael, they knew that they were doomed. They just did not know when this would occur. Therefore, every year on the night of Tisha B'Av, the men between the ages of twenty and sixty would dig their own graves and lie down in them. Every year, a number of them died in their sleep. Now, imagine in your mind the reaction of those who did wake up. Do you think they rolled over for a few catnaps? They certainly jumped out of their "graves" and celebrated their continued life.

"Many years ago, as a young man, I became ill with a serious, life-threatening disease. I should not have survived. To the surprise of the medical community, I was miraculously spared. Eventually, I recovered completely. I realize that I should have died. I do not know why I was spared.

"So now, when I wake up in the early morning, whatever time it may be, I am exhilarated. Hashem has granted me a reprieve - another day. How can I go back to sleep after receiving such a gift? I am filled with gratitude, so I jump out of bed and go to the bais hamedrash to study Torah. This is what motivates me. Now, you know."

It is a powerful story, reflecting an incredible sense of gratitude. It portrays a lesson we should all take to heart - and to bed.

And you will return unto Hashem, your G-d. (30:2)

The opportunity afforded us to perform teshuvah, repent, and return to Hashem, is one that our Torah leaders of the past have viewed as an incredible gift. Horav Shmelke, zl, m'Nickolsburg once remarked, "I worry what kind of bliss there can be in the Eternal World if there is no Yom Kippur. What kind of existence is it if one cannot perform teshuvah?" This sums it up. It is one of those unique gifts that we do not sufficiently appreciate.

The problem is that we find all kinds of excuses not to repent: either it is too late; or too difficult. These are examples of common responses to explain why we do not change. A man once remarked to a rabbi, "I would perform teshuvah if I was sure it would relieve me of all my misery." The rabbi quickly replied, "Did you also make your sins conditional?" It is just another excuse.

Veritably, one must be sagacious in performing teshuvah, since it takes guile to triumph over the cunning of the yetzer hora, evil-inclination. The yetzer hora tells a person, "Do not bother, as you have sinned far too much. You have no chance to return." The yetzer hora is right. As long as a person feels that even after teshuvah he will still carry the burden of guilt on his shoulders, he will not perform teshuvah. After all, why should he? He must believe that teshuvah wipes the slate clean. Repentance is like an eraser. The sin is gone. Horav Yechiel Meir, zl, m'Gustenin once commented about why he refused to learn how to play chess, "They told me I could not retract a wrong move. I believe that teshuvah can undo every wrong." It just takes sincerity.

You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d. (29:9)

The Midrash explains the word nitzavim, standing. When the people heard the frightening curses enumerated in Parashas Ki Savo, they were overwhelmed with fear at what seemed to be a

hopeless future. Hence, Moshe Rabbeinu comforted them, saying that despite their previous sinful behavior, they were still standing before Hashem. He had not eliminated them in the past, and He will continue to sustain them in the future. The Tochachah, Admonition, was there to inspire fear, as well as to indicate the punishments which would atone for their evil deeds. The commentators wonder why Klal Yisrael reacted so negatively to the curses in Parashas Ki Savo and not to the forty-nine curses enumerated in Parashas Bechukosai.

Horav Shmuel David Walkin, zl, suggests that there is one curse in the litany of ninety-eight curses that inspired the Jewish People with overwhelming fear: "He will bring upon you all the sufferings of Egypt, of which you were terrified, and they will cleave to you." (Devarim 28:60) He cites the Alter, zl, m'Kelm who explains the significance of machalas Mitzrayim, the illnesses of Egypt, and relates why they are referred to with the unique term, makah, plague. He explains that the makas Mitzrayim did not accomplish anything in terms of atonement. Pharaoh continued along his sinful way, ignoring the punishment. If the illness does not effect a change, it is a machalah b'li refuah, an illness for which there is neither cure nor therapeutic effect. The makos that Klal Yisrael undergo bring about teshuvah, repentance, inspiring them to rise up from the depths of sin to correct their ways. This is the underlying meaning of the pasuk in Shemos 15:26, "If you hearken diligently to the voice of Hashem... then any of the diseases that I placed upon Egypt, I will not bring upon you, for I am Hashem, your Healer." In the Talmud Sanhedrin, 101, Chazal ask, "If He does not send illness, why is healing necessary?" They explain that if Klal Yisrael listens, then Hashem will not send illness. If they do not listen, He will send illness, but He will heal them, because the purpose of His punishment is not punitive, but restorative, to purge them of sin and influence them to repent. Hashem will never send against us an Egyptian form of distress, the focus of which is purely to punish. Whatever emanates from Hashem is to inspire us to return to Him.

We now understand why Klal Yisrael became so disconcerted when they heard the curse that Hashem would bring upon them the sufferings of Egypt. They could handle the punishment if it would stimulate teshuvah. The thought that they would have pain for the purpose of pain, punishment that was punitive -- and not conducive to repentance -- was frightening.

Incidentally, there is a powerful lesson to be derived herein, especially as we prepare to usher in a new year with its challenges, its opportunities for success, its trials and travails, and its symbol of hope. What Hashem does to us is really for us, to make us better people, to serve Him better, that we can ultimately earn the true reward that is awaiting each one of us.

You are standing today, all of you...the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers - all the men of Yisrael. (29:9)

On the last day of Moshe Rabbeinu's life, he assembled all of Klal Yisrael and inducted them into Hashem's Covenant for the last time. In the Yerushalmi at the end of Meseches Horayos, Chazal make the following intriguing statement: "Why did Moshe Rabbeinu precede the roshim, heads of the tribes, before the zekeinim, the Torah scholars and elders, while Yehoshua, upon speaking to the people, preceded the elders before the leaders of the tribes? Moshe did not exert himself in the study of Torah. Hashem gave it to him as a gift, thus ensuring that he would never forget it. Yehoshua, in contrast, had to toil in order to retain the Torah that he had learned from Moshe. Thus, Yehoshua had a

more profound appreciation of the zekeinim than did Moshe."

What an incredible statement! Horav Moshe Shapiro, shlita, adds that only Chazal could issue such a compelling declaration. Moshe Rabbeinu, our greatest teacher, the quintessential leader of Klal Yisrael, the Adon v'Avi haNeviim, master and father of all prophets, did not know how to value the toil expended by Torah scholars as well as Yehoshua did. He was the greatest scholar, but since his scholarship was not the result of yegia, toil and exertion, he was missing a vital component in his ability to hold the talmid chacham, Torah scholar, in the proper esteem.

Chazal are clearly asserting that in order to appreciate ameilus ba'Torah, toil in Torah, one must himself have had to participate in Torah study b'ameilus. Just as one does not reach the summit of Torah knowledge without prior exertion in studying Torah, so, too, is he not qualified to value and appreciate those who have achieved proficiency in Torah knowledge. To be ameil ba'Torah is to never interrupt one's learning. To paraphrase Horav Elchonon Wasserman, zl, "Vihigisa" means one must tracht, think, in learning. There should not be any cessation in one's relationship with Torah learning.

We may add that this concept applies to all endeavors. Unless one has "been there," he is not qualified to judge one who has. All too often, we make judgment calls and establish opinions based upon how we perceive an issue or a person. Yet, we forget to take into consideration how this issue or person evolved to this point. If there are reservations about Moshe Rabbeinu's capacity for evaluating, yegias ha'Torah, what should we say?

When a person is ameil ba'Torah, genuinely toils in Torah, he can reach unlimited heights, regardless of his ability. Furthermore, the rewards in store for those who toil in Torah -- and the esteem in which they are held -- are incredible. Toil is not just a lofty way of studying Torah; rather, it is an absolute requirement! Horav Yisrael Gustman, zl, was a gaon who exemplified ameilus ba'Torah. When he was only twenty years old, he was appointed as a dayan, judge, on the bais din of Harav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, zl, the venerable rav of pre-World War II Vilna, and the leader of world Jewry. Rav Yisrael served as dayan for twenty-five years. When he came to Eretz Yisrael, he was granted an audience with the Steipler Rav. The Steipler Rav could not hear well. Thus, he had his visitors write down their requests. Rav Yisrael wrote his request and signed his note, Yisrael Gustman. Upon reading the note, the Steipler queried, "Was your father the dayan in Rav Chaim Ozer's bais din?" Rav Yisrael replied, "That is I."

"That is you?!" the Steipler asked incredulously. The Steipler was not well and hardly left his house. Yet, he stood up and ran to Rav Yisrael, hugging and kissing him. "You have no idea the esteem in which you were held by Rav Chaim Ozer!"

A similar incident occurred when Rav Gustman went to visit the Tchebiner Rav, zl, who donned his hat, stood up, and recited the special brachah one makes upon seeing an outstanding talmid chacham. One who toils in Torah achieves the greatest respect and reaches the zenith in Torah knowledge.

Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, gives a practical analogy about toil in Torah. He asserts that one who is ameil, toils, is assured of gadlus ba'Torah, noble achievement in Torah. Hashem gives the Torah to each and every Jew but only if the person prepares vessels for containing it. Someone who comes with a "shnapps-glass," shot glass, will have his small cup filled. One who comes with a large barrel will have his container filled to the top. Every one of us should maximize the time we dedicate to Torah study. Those that do will reap rewards commensurate with their toil.

And you will return unto Hashem your G-d, and listen to His voice. (30:2)

Repentance - the opportunity to return to Hashem, to once again be accepted by Him and be able to appeal to Him - is the ultimate kindness that Hashem offers us. The following analogy, cited by Horav Yaakov Beifus, Shlita, demonstrates this idea. Rebelling against the king is without a doubt the most extreme transgression one can make. The punishment is commensurate with the level of rebellion and the relationship of the rebel to the king. The closer one is to the king, the greater and more serious the infraction and eventual punishment. In one of the provinces, the king's closest friend was indicted for treasonous behavior and incarcerated in the local prison until he could be brought to trial. It became the biggest event in the country; everybody was talking about the act of treason perpetrated by the king's closest ally. As angry as the king originally was, with time his feelings of kinship prevailed, and he no longer sought to punish him harshly. He could, however, neither simply mitigate the act of treason nor ignore the effect it would have on the country. His hands were tied. How could he ignore the country's laws and not punish his friend?

The rebel was acutely aware of the king's predicament. Yet, he felt bad. He realized the error of his ways, the folly of his actions - and with deep remorse and fear - he waited for his impending punishment.

One morning, he awoke to hear sounds of digging coming from beneath the floor of his cell. He was frightened that the ground beneath him was caving in. He stared at the ground as it shook and rumbled. Suddenly he heard a crack, and then a hole broke through the floor. None other than the king himself appeared, "Quick, escape while you can. This is your only opportunity to leave this cell alive."

Overcome with relief and joy, the prisoner embraced the king and kissed him. Together, they covered the hole and escaped into the night. As they traveled through the forest to safety, the king said, "For a while now, I have been thinking of how I could rescue you. I knew that because of the gravity of your sin, I could do nothing to compromise my position to help you. The only thing I could do was to dig a passageway from beneath my throne room, which no one enters, to your cell. Every day, I dug deeper and farther until I reached you."

This is what teshuvah, repentance, is all about. Once a person sins against Hashem, there is really no way he can reinstate himself - unless he is granted a special dispensation, a favor that goes beyond the rules. In the Talmud Yerushalmi, Chazal teach us that when "Wisdom" was asked, "What is the punishment for the sinner?" the response was negative: no hope, the ultimate punishment. Similar responses were received from "Prophecy" and Torah. When Hashem was asked, He responded, "Let him repent, and he will be forgiven."

According to the principles of Justice, there is no forgiveness for one who sins against Hashem. It is Hashem Who forgives when we repent with sincerity, because He is a loving father and friend.

And you shall choose life. (30:19)

A poor man came to a businessman and asked for a loan: "I need one hundred dollars, and I am willing to pay seven percent interest on the loan. There is one stipulation, however I can only pay you one dollar a week," said the poor man. "I appreciate your situation, but I cannot help you," the businessman responded. "I must be paid all at once, not in installments." Understandably, the poor man left quite upset. The businessman's associate who witnessed the entire proceedings wondered why his

friend would throw away an opportunity in order to make a quick profit.

The businessman explained that in the end all he would have left is one dollar. When he has pocket change lying around, he tends to spend it. If he would take his payment in installments, he would quickly deplete the money and have nothing left.

The Lubliner Maggid, zl, explains that the same idea applies to life. We are here for a short duration: seventy, eighty years, or more. These years are not granted to us in one lump sum, but day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, until we are suddenly called back to return our soul to its Maker. At any moment in time, our past is long gone, our future is unsure and our present is, at best, fleeting, gone before we know it. Regrettably, man's nature is to ignore his life until his last moments when he has very little time left. He looks back to his past and it is gone, the present is going quickly and the future is only a dream. The one thing he needs the most - time - is almost gone. He realizes now that he has squandered his most precious commodity. Let us wake up while the future is still a reality.

Horav Yaakov Kamenetzky, zl, offers an analogy that teaches a similar lesson. A worker once performed labor for someone, and he was now owed one hundred dollars. The householder was short on cash and, instead, offered the worker fifty lottery tickets each valued at two dollars. The worker could have easily sold the lottery tickets and received his one hundred dollars. Instead, he played the lottery with all fifty tickets - and lost. He now had nothing: no prize and no cash. He returned to the householder and complained that he had no money. Obviously, the householder ignored the foolish worker who decided to waste his pay on a game of chance.

In this world, there is only one means of payment - life. A person has to use his common sense in order to enjoy the gift of life in its entirety. Some play the lottery, devoting their life to material pursuits, only to discover that it is all paper, meaningless paper which does not access for him entrance into the World to Come. One who is wise and uses life to amass mitzvos and good deeds will have a treasure chest filled with the admission fee to Olam Habah. The way we live in this world determines what will occur when our time is up.

And all the nations will say, "For what reason did Hashem do so...why this wrathfulness of great anger?" (29:23)

The question asked by the nations of the world is truly a compelling one. Why did Hashem do so to His People, His Nation whom He loves so much? Many nations have been punished for their sins, but no nation has suffered so greatly as Klal Yisrael. What was their transgression that catalyzed such unprecedented punishment?

The answer is written in the following pasuk: "Because they forsook the covenant of Hashem." No other nation was granted such a relationship - a covenant bonding Hashem with Klal Yisrael.

Consequently, Hashem does not deal with them as He deals with other nations. When Klal Yisrael sins, they are not simply rebelling; they are, instead, nullifying a covenant of friendship, a bond of love. When one is guilty of a wrongdoing against his friend, it is much worse than if this infraction were to be committed against an average person with whom he has not cemented a bond of friendship.

Horav Eliezer Menachem M. Shach, zl, explains this further. He distinguishes between a Jew's

personal relationship with Hashem, and Klal Yisrael's collective relationship. When an individual sins, it is viewed as a shortcoming, a failing due to one's falling under the influence of his yetzer hara, evil inclination. When Klal Yisrael sins as a nation, it is much more serious. Then it is haforas bris, an abrogation of their covenant with Hashem. This is especially noteworthy when the Jewish People as a "nation" do not act in accordance with the code of Jewish Law given to us at Har Sinai. This is referred to as "organizational iniquity," which, in effect, denotes a general breakdown of our relationship with the Almighty. Regrettably, when in the eyes of the world people come across as speaking for the Jewish nation as a whole, we are all responsible for its consequence, even if we do not ascribe to their views and practices. Our indifference is our initiation and, subsequently, our source of responsibility.

For this commandment ... it is not hidden from you...It is not in heaven. (30:11,12)

Rashi explains that if Torah were to be in heaven, we would be compelled to try to scale the heavens to study it. The Maharsha supplements this, explaining that if the knowledge of the Torah were so above us that it was beyond our capacity, we would still be expected to make every attempt to master it. In other words, there are no excuses. We must study Torah to the best of our abilities, extending ourselves as much as humanly possible.

The Torah was given to us on Har Sinai - a place which today eludes us. There is even a dispute among Chazal as to the exact date it was given. Indeed, as the Baalei Mussar explain, Torah has no time or place. It must be studied anywhere and always. The Maharal m'Prague teaches that one must study Torah up until the moment his soul leaves its earthly abode - the moment of death. Death does not cause a cessation of Torah study, but rather, one continues to study Torah in the Eternal world as he did in this world.

I remember hearing that my rebbe, Horav Boruch Sorotzkin, zl, shortly before his petirah, passing, was sitting in a wheelchair waiting to undergo therapy for the devastating and painful disease that wracked his body. The pain was beyond intense, yet, he held a sefer in his hand and studied Torah. His son, Horav Yitzchak, Shlita, asked him, "How can you learn at a time like this when you are in such terrible pain?" The Rosh HaYeshivah responded, "When else shall I learn, if not now?" One who learns in this world with such an ahavas Torah, love of Torah, will certainly continue his study when he takes his rightful place in the Heavenly Yeshivah.

Why, really, is it expected of a person to go to "the limit" to study Torah? After all, if it is overwhelming, if it is beyond our grasp, how can we be commanded to study it anyway? Apparently, the idea is that one must understand that as far as the study of Torah is concerned, there are no shortcuts nor excuses. Once a person has an inkling that he might be excused from his responsibility because of extenuating circumstances, he will find a way to interpret even the most minor excuse as an extenuating circumstance. Let us take morning minyan for an example. When one has more than one minyan which he can attend, he will sleep late knowing fully well that he has an opportunity to daven later. If there is, however, only one minyan, then he has no alternative but to arise in the morning on time. Likewise, once one knows that he has a way to validate his lack of Torah study, he will make use of it. Veritably, anything of value is worth working for.

It is not in heaven...Nor is it across the sea...Rather, the matter is very near to you - in your mouth and in your heart - to perform it. (30:12,13,14)

The Torah is accessible to all. The goal of knowing and fulfilling the Torah may seem difficult, but it only seems that way. Indeed, it is very much within human reach. All one has to do is make a sincere effort to grasp it - and he will succeed. There is a more profound aspect to the idea of "a sincere effort." Horav Chaim Shmuelewitz, zl, cites the Talmud in Temurah 16a wherein Chazal explain the source of Osniel ben Kenaz's name. Actually, his name was Yehudah. He was called Osniel because it is an acronym for "Ono Kel," "Hashem answered him". He is also referred to as Yaavetz, which denotes "Yaetz v'ribeitz Torah b'Yisrael," "he advised and disseminated Torah to Klal Yisrael." Chazal explain that Osniel demanded that he be granted the opportunity to disseminate Torah to the masses. Otherwise, he would go to the grave - immediately! Rav Chaim queries how one can make such a demand on the Almighty? "If you fulfill my request - good. If not - I am finished. I will go to the grave!" Is this not a bit presumptuous? Rav Chaim explains that the key word in Osniel's request was the word "miyad," immediately. He was saying to Hashem that "success or failure is dependent on me, and consequently it is a matter of life or death. I will either make it or I will die." When success in Torah is measured by such extremes, then Hashem responds immediately. This should be the way a ben Torah, student of Torah, studies. He must realize that success or failure are extremes. He either succeeds in grasping the Torah, or he is lost. When success means that much to him - he triumphs. Man's success or failure is determined by his personal striving and attitude. He has no one to blame for his failure other than himself. Likewise, his success is attributed to his own persistence and tenacity - and Hashem's "help."

From the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water. (29:10)

Everybody was present that day, from the woodcutter to the water carrier. Is this the correct sequence? Should it not be worded, "From your leadership all the way down to your woodchoppers" or "From your goldsmiths to your woodchoppers"? One would think that the woodchopper and water carrier are basically on an equal level. Shivim Panim LaTorah suggests the following idea. When the ax is raised up over the head of the woodchopper, the "ax" would never consider that it is higher or more distinguished than the woodchopper, because the woodchopper is the one who is raising it up. Likewise, when the pail is lowered into a well, would the water-drawer even for a moment think that he is on a higher plateau than the pail? After all, if he would not have lowered the pail, it would have been on the same elevation as he.

This analogy may be applied to our leadership. The leaders should never feel they are on a higher level than the people whom they serve, because, without the people who selected them as their leaders, they would be no more distinguished than the common person. No leader should ever look down upon any person, because ultimately the leader is responsible for the development of the people he serves. If they do not ascend, it is because he is a poor leader. The leadership have an enormous responsibility. That is why they have been selected for this position. If the leaders fail in their charge, if they do not succeed in elevating their community both spiritually and morally, they not only do not deserve their position, they are actually depriving the community of their due. They should take a lesson from the woodcutter and water-drawer.

No Jew is unimportant. Every person has great value. The ability to value and appreciate each individual is the sign of a great person and one who truly deserves to be a leader. Horav Shmuel zl, m'Lubavitch had among his many followers a wealthy diamond merchant by the name of Reb Monya Mosinson. One time, Reb Monya was sitting with a group of chassidim at the Rebbe's table and the

conversation turned to the poverty which beleaguered the Russian Jewish community. Suddenly, in middle of the conversation, the Rebbe began to laud the poor Jewish workers who slaved from early morning until late at night in order to provide for their families. They preferred to be subject to the most difficult back-breaking labor, rather than live off the community offering. Reb Monya interjected, "I am surprised that the Rebbe is making such a to-do about these simple people." "These people possess many valuable virtues" the Rebbe countered. "I do not see their qualities," Reb Monya responded, as he motioned with his hand in a condescending and derogatory manner.

The Rebbe did not reply to this disparaging remark. The next morning the Rebbe asked Reb Monya if he had brought a collection of diamonds with him. He immediately proceeded to take out his bag of diamonds and spread them out on the table. He was so excited about his wares that he began to point out the exceptional qualities of each individual diamond. "I see nothing special about these diamonds," the Rebbe said in a mocking manner. "Rebbe!" Reb Monya exclaimed in a slightly higher voice. "One must be a maven, proficient and adept in the value of diamonds, before he can pass judgment on these stones. Diamonds are remarkable stones whose individual beauty and value one must appreciate." Upon hearing this, the Rebbe looked at Reb Monya. With a stern, accusing tone, he reminded the diamond merchant of the conversation they had had the previous day, "This same idea applies to every Jew. Each and every Jew has inestimable value. Only, it takes a maven to recognize this."

Perhaps there is among you a root flourishing with gall and wormwood. (29:17)

And you will return unto Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice.(30:3)

A remarkable contrast between two people: the one who defies rebuke, laughing it off with disdain and derision; and the baal teshuvah, penitent, who hears Hashem's call, who responds to His voice, and returns wholeheartedly. Two people - or could it be one person, one individual in different stages of his spiritual development? Is it possible for the hard-core sinner, the individual who mocks Hashem and His followers bitterly, to return and be accepted? It is certainly possible for him to be accepted: Hashem is a loving Father Who waits patiently for His errant child. How does one whose attitude is likened to a bitter root, however, change from one extreme to another? We do not always know what turns someone on, because we are not always aware of what has turned them off. If we fail to properly diagnose the illness, we will have a difficult time discerning a cure.

Rabbi Paysach Krohn tells a story about the Klausenberger Rebbe, zl, which demonstrates this idea. The Rebbe was a unique individual. His love for all Jews was legendary. He had an especially keen interest in children. Immediately following World War II and its accompanying atrocities against the Jewish People, the Rebbe opened a yeshivah and a Bais Yaakov school in a Displaced Persons camp. The conditions were dismal and lamentable, but Torah study, the lifeblood of our People, has to continue. One day, the Rebbe was told about Meshullam, a young man who had succumbed to the heresy that followed Hitler's holocaust of our People. Until the age of sixteen, Meshullam had exhibited signs of becoming an incredible talmid chacham, Torah scholar. He was exceptionally diligent in his Torah study and meticulous in his mitzvah observance. Then came the Holocaust. Having lost most of his family and observed the tragedy that befell so many others, he rejected his Judaism, undermining any attempt to bring him back to observance.

The Rebbe was not a person to take "no" for an answer, especially when a Yiddishe neshamah, Jewish soul, hung in the balance. He asked that the bachur, young man, be brought to him. When Meshullam entered the Rebbe's room, the Rebbe motioned for him to sit down next to him. "I am told that you are the son of Reb Laibish, whom I knew very well," the Rebbe said. "Yes," Meshullam responded, glibly. He was not going to be lulled into any conversation about Judaism and faith in G-d. He knew it all, and he had rejected it after Auschwitz. For him, the world of religion was something of the past.

"They tell me your were once a great masmid, diligent in your studies, back home. Is this true?" the Rebbe asked in a non-confrontational tone. Knowing fully well the significance of Torah study to the Rebbe, he decided not to give the Rebbe the pleasure of telling him that at one time he had conformed to the demands of religion and loved Torah study. He simply nodded to the Rebbe's question.

"But, now you are angry," the Rebbe said in a soft, soothing tone. "Of course, I am angry," he blurted out. "How could I tolerate the heinous, brutal destruction of so many people? The best were taken from us, the finest are lost forever, and you expect me not to be angry!"

The Rebbe lovingly extended his hand and touched Meshullam's face, telling him, "You are so right. I also suffered heavy losses. They took my beloved wife and eleven children and murdered them. I was left alone, with nothing. You are right. The best were taken from us and look at what is left." With these words the Rebbe suddenly burst out in tears and began to sob. As the pent-up emotion poured from him, Meshullam also began to cry. Together, the Rebbe and Meshullam mourned their losses on each other's shoulders.

It was no longer necessary for the Rebbe to say anything. Rebuke was not and had never been a factor. There was so much bitterness bottled up in Meshullam that only needed a release. The Rebbe was that catalyst. Words were not necessary. Tears, streams of tears, an outpouring of emotion is what Meshullam needed. The Rebbe understood this - while others, regrettably, did not. Meshullam returned, because the Klausenberger Rebbe understood his need. It is unfortunate that more people like Meshullam did not connect with someone of the caliber of the Klausenberger Rebbe.

The hidden (sins) are for Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed (sins) are for us and for our children forever. (29:28)

Simply, we are not held responsible for those sinners who hide their evil. The hidden sinners are in Hashem's province. Our focus must be on those whose evil is blatant, who have no shame and no fear. Our lack of response to those sins and sinners - and in some cases, our open acceptance of their evil - impugns the integrity of Klal Yisrael. In an alternative exegesis, the Belzer Rebbe, zl, suggests that nistaros and niglos, "hidden" and "revealed," refer to mitzvos and good deeds, but not to sins. His pshat, rendering of the pasuk, is better understood in light of the following story:

A man was once called in from the street to join a minyan, quorum, being held in a private home for a group of aveilim, mourners. The minyan was being held in an apartment in a very frum, observant, section of Yerushalayim. He was, therefore, surprised to see that the mourners and a number of the minyan attendees were wearing their yarmulkes perched precariously on their heads to indicate that wearing a yarmulke was not a common occurrence for them. Yet, when he looked around the room it appeared like the home of a devout Jew. The shelves were filled with seforim, volumes of Torah

literature, that were well-worn and used. This enigma was even more puzzling as a result of the fact that many of the seforim had notes and observations penciled in alongside the text. What was going on here?

After Mincha, the guest could no longer contain himself. He went over to one of the mourners and asked for an explanation, "Do any of the deceased's children use his books?" he asked, judiciously attempting to find out if any of the siblings might be observant. "No, he was the only one that was observant. You see, when my father came home from work, he would quickly execute his fatherly responsibilities and proceed to lock himself for the rest of the evening in his study, immersed in his precious books. Although we knew he was studying in there, this knowledge was basically hearsay, because we never actually saw him studying Torah."

What a living tragedy! Children learn from their parents. When children see their parents studying Torah, when they observe how their parents value Torah study, they learn to also value and appreciate it. This applies to chesed, acts of kindness, as well. Children should share in their parents good deeds. Make them a part of the endeavor. It is certainly more important and enduring than playing baseball with them. The most important memories children look back on when they become parents are related to the quality time they spent with their parents. How we spend this time with them will determine what aspect of our relationship with them they will remember and eternalize.

Let us return to the Belzer Rebbe's homiletic rendering of the pasuk. He explains that as Moshe Rabbeinu was about to take leave of his beloved nation, he turned to them and said, "The hidden things are Hashem's, but the revealed ones are for us and our children." If we act righteously but keep these acts hidden; if we do not include our children in our meritorious activities; if they are not privy to our Torah study and acts of chesed, then only Hashem will know of the honorable and upright way we lived. Our children will remain unaware and, consequently, uninspired. If we see to it, however, that our positive actions are revealed to our children, then these good deeds will become a part of the family legacy as we impart our noble actions to the next generation to carry them on.

For He (Hashem) is your life and the length of your days. (30:20)

What is the difference between, "chayeicha," your life, and "orech yamecha," length of your days? They both seem to express the same idea. Kol Simchah distinguishes between these two terms using the following analogy. A man was diagnosed with a serious, life-threatening illness. He had to undergo painful and dangerous surgery in order to live. The recuperation was painful and long. When he would be healed, however, it would all have been worth it. Indeed, at this point, as bad as the surgery might have seemed, its pain and debilitating effect was the precursor of his life being extended.

On the other hand, there was an individual who seemed to be having a "grand" time. He ate what he pleased, did not exercise, and basically broke every rule for taking care of his health. He seemed to be "living," but actually he was digging an early grave for himself. One suffered and seemed to be dying, while the other one lived it up and seemed to be alive and vibrant, when he was really on a collision course with his early demise. One lived, but did not have long life; the other seemed near death while undergoing painful treatment, but in the end, saw his life-span extended. This is the way of the world. For continued good health, one must suffer a little. As the popular maxim states, "No pain, no gain."

The Torah has a different quality to it. It is our life. When we study - we enjoy - we live! The

one who studies Torah earns Olam Habah, but also has tremendous enjoyment. In addition, the Torah study that is his olam hazeh also catalyzes his Olam Habah, so that he reaps both benefits - life and length of days.

You are standing today, all of you, the heads of your tribes, your elders, your small children, your women. (29:9)

Is there a specific reason that the Torah emphasizes the fact that the heads of the tribes, the Jewish leadership, were also gathered there? Horav Tzvi Hirsch Ferber, zl, explains that ultimately Hashem judges everybody, regardless of the importance of his position, whether he has fulfilled his teudah, mission, in life. He cites Horav Chaim Volozhiner, zl, who explains that the tefillah which we recite in the Mussaf Shemonah Esrei of Rosh Hashanah, “maasei ish u’fekudoso” “everyone’s deed and mission”, delineates the function that each individual must carry out. We all have responsibilities that we are to carry out during our tenure in this world. The Almighty judges us based upon whether we carried out our responsibilities. A rebbe, Torah teacher, is judged accordingly: Did he perform his task appropriately? A father is judged accordingly: Was he a “good” father and husband? A woman is judged as a wife and mother. In other words, while Hashem judges us as human beings and individuals, He also judges us in accordance with our specific role. One might be a great person, but a weak teacher or father or community leader. While one’s role does not necessarily reflect upon his character, he still must answer for his non-fulfillment of his individual responsibility.

And he will bless himself in his heart saying, “peace will be with me, though I walk as my heart sees fit.” (29:18)

One must be extremely sure of himself, ever smug, to feel that he has no cause to worry. Horav Tzvi Pesach Frank, zl, suggests that this pasuk refers to the individual who asserts that his heart will save him. He does not care about mitzvos. He rejects the Torah, but he has a “good heart,” he is a nice, kind human being. He gives of himself, opening his heart to those in need. Hashem does not forgive such a person. The heart is but one organ of the body, albeit an important one, that keeps the entire body functioning. One who just breathes is not very much alive.

The Chofetz Chaim, zl, takes an alternative approach to explaining this pasuk. A few members of Klal Yisrael have always been alienated from Judaism. They have concealed their indifference to the religion, always seeking ways to justify their assimilation and estrangement from the faith for which their ancestors had died. Today, (the Chofetz Chaim passed away over sixty years ago) there are those who, under the guise of “a new philosophy” of religion, or an “innovative approach” to religion, have made a mockery of the Torah and its precepts. Rather than conceding their weakness, admitting that they desire a material lifestyle, or that morality is something with which they cannot contend, they resort to transforming their weakness into an “ism,” a new theology. To the person who says, “I walk as my heart sees fit,” I do not sin – I translate the Torah differently: Hashem will not forgive him. There is no greater form of “perikas ol,” “throwing off the yoke” of mitzvos, than using evil to perform a mitzvah.

The later generations will say, your children who will arise after you and the foreigner who will come

from a distant land. (29:21)

The Jew and the nachri - foreigner from a distant land - will both be shocked when they see Hashem's destruction. What seems to be an innocuous verse is tragically a curse that critiques the behavior of Klal Yisrael in the days preceding the advent of Moshiach. Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl, bemoans the bitter prophecy, the tragic portent for the "acharis ha'yamim", the prediction that in the end of the days, the yedias ha'Torah, Torah knowledge, of many Jews will be equivalent to that of a "foreigner from a distant land." How tragic it is when the non-Jew knows more about our religion than some of us! How heart-breaking it is when the gentile on the street knows more about Jewish laws and customs than many of our Jewish brothers.

Rav Chaim was, unfortunately, far from wrong. The am ha'aretz, illiterate Jew, that existed seventy-five years ago was versed in Jewish basics, had a love of Torah, was devoted to his religion and took great pride in everything Jewish that he did. He simply was not a great lamden, deep-thinking, erudite scholar. Most shtetlach, villages in Europe, did not have their own yeshivos; boys went to work at a young age to help support large, poverty-stricken families. They simply did not have the opportunity to study Torah. They were not, however, estranged from their religion. Today we see the effects of nearly a century of assimilation in which grandparents - who immigrated to these shores - feared the "influence" that orthodox day schools might have on their children's future, opting for the "less demanding", public schools. Many parents sought to erase the memories of Europe in their hope to achieve acceptance in American society. Others were simply too busy trying to earn a living to "worry" about their children. Thus, we are encountering a new form of illiteracy - total illiteracy. We frequently find fine, well-meaning Jewish adults who are totally ignorant of their heritage. They are easy prey for anyone who seeks to turn them away from their religion - because they have no familiarity with it.

Many people who know little at least ask questions; they are aware that there is some type of Providence. The fire of the Yiddishe neshamah, Jewish soul, cannot be extinguished. It is our job to reawaken this fire, returning it to its original glory.

You are standing today, all of you. (29:9)

When the people heard the frightening klalos, curses, of Parashas Ki Savo, they despaired. They felt they had no opportunity for survival; Hashem no longer cared for them. Hashem responded with the comforting words, "Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem. -- You are standing today, all of you." Hashem had sustained them in the past despite their iniquities; He would continue to maintain them in the future. The Midrash Tanchuma advances this thought with the comment, "Fallen nations never rise to stand again. (Klal) Yisrael falls, but rises to stand once more." Jewish resilience is integral to our heritage. Indeed, tenacity is part of the Jewish psyche. Moshe Rabbeinu articulated the most frightening curses. Yet, he emphasized our permanence by using the word "nitzavim" in place of the usual "omedim", a reference to a firm position.

We may add that "omedim" infers standing erect while nitzavim implies standing firm. The following message may be suggested: How straight or tall one stands is not important; rather, one's endurance is of consequence. While some may erect impressive, stately edifices, - presumably to serve their spiritual needs, - they are of no value if they have no lasting effect. Judaism can just as well be

served by the quaint shtiebel if it is characterized by sincerity and conviction. The important concept is permanence, a phenomenon which can only be manifest by our capacity to transmit our heritage from one generation to the next.

You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers...from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water. (29:9,10)

Since the Torah says "kulchem -- all of you", it obviously includes everyone from the "wood chopper" to the "water drawer." Why is it necessary to reiterate the various classes or positions held by individual Jews? Horav Elyakim Schlesinger, Shlita, suggests that the covenant did not necessarily bind only the klal, the collective community of Klal Yisrael, but also each individual Jew, regardless of his station in life. If ever a breakdown in the spiritual fabric of Klal Yisrael would occur, if the leadership for some reason errs, the covenant would be sustained via the individual Jew.

The Brisker Rav, zl, related how his grandfather, Rav Yoshe Ber Solevetchik, zl, the Bais Halevi, was once approached by a group of rabbanim who were undecided regarding accepting a government edict that they study the national language. The Rav felt that this was only the beginning of an attempt to assimilate their culture with ours, a move which would ultimately lead to total assimilation. The Bais Halevi protested vehemently against this move, asserting, "If the Torah will not be sustained through the rabbanim, it will be maintained by the shoe makers who would not be availed the opportunity to study the national language!"

Furthermore, Horav Schlesinger comments, we infer from here that the concept of "areivus", - mutual responsibility for one another - and the obligation to admonish whenever an infraction occurs, rests primarily upon the shoulders of our spiritual leadership. Each individual Jew, however, also is responsible for the fulfillment of this ideal. This is surely not a call to undermine the authority of our leadership. Yet, the situation may arise that either due to political expediency, or personal vested interests of a leader, he seems to be resisting confronting an issue of vital importance to the community. In this case, someone should take a stand for the sake of the Torah. This must be accomplished with respect and kavod haTorah, even if the leader does not seem to warrant this special deference. The position must be honored, if not the individual.

The Ohr Ha'chaim Hakadosh comments that Moshe divided the people into categories according to their stations in life in order to suggest that one's responsibility toward others is commensurate with how many people he or she can positively affect. Indeed, the higher the profile of one's position, the greater is the mass he can influence. Due to the limitations imposed by the laws of tznius, modesty, women can inspire their immediate families and friends. Some might find this demeaning and self-defeating. It is, however, only a state of mind that breeds contempt among those who lack the self-assurance that comes with a positive self-image and sense of pride in serving Hashem according to His will. The common laborer does not have the opportunity to reach out to the masses, but he can have a positive impact upon those with whom he comes in contact on a regular basis. The rule is simple: Hashem does not expect one to accomplish more than is feasible. On the other hand, He is not content with less.

For you pass into the covenant of Hashem, your G-d, and into his imprecation that Hashem, your G-d, seals with you today...Perhaps there is among you a man or woman, whose heart turns away today from being with Hashem. (29:11,17)

The parsha opens with everyone gathered together as Moshe initiates Klal Yisrael into the covenant for the final time. This may be the most idyllic moment in Jewish history. Everyone is together, unified in harmony one with another, about to be charged by Moshe at the closing scenes of his tenure as the quintessential leader of Klal Yisrael. It is an inspirational moment, marked by excitement about a job well done. This moment truly calls for the proverbial "pat on the back." They have made it! We observe, however, a turn of events. During this exalted moment in time, Moshe began to talk about suspicions - conjecture of possible undercurrents of rebellion. He addressed the man or woman, tribe or family, whose heart had turned away from Hashem. He identified a bitter root, festering, growing, waiting for that moment when it could surge forward in open defiance and turn to idol worship. While this is certainly a concern to address, is this the appropriate time for this admonishment? Why shatter this perfect moment?

Horav David Shneur, Shlita, notes that in Moshe's admonishment he builds his suspicion with great emphasis on one point - the heart, the seat of emotion and passion. "Shalom yiheyeh li, ki bishrirus libi eilach -- Peace be with me, though I walk as my heart sees it." The origin of his rebellion, the root of his defiance deeply imbedded, concealed from everyone - even himself - is the heart.

Moshe Rabbeinu exhorted each individual to introspect, to thoroughly search himself for that "shoresh ra" -- bitter root -- that would fester into greater evil, to the point that it will bring him down from the zenith of virtue to the nadir of depravity. From the virtuous ben Torah, he "suddenly" is transformed into an idol worshipper. It is all possible if one does not eradicate that bitter root. This is especially possible when one is so preoccupied with his virtue, his bikur cholim, visiting the sick, acts of loving kindness, daily tefillah. Indeed, he might even be one of those people who take Judaism very seriously, always seeking to perform the mitzvah to the extreme. This type of Jew is so preoccupied with his frumkeit that he overlooks the real source of his problem. In fact, he has no clue as to his error.

At this specific moment everyone was gathered together, each secure in his spiritual position, at peace with himself and with one another. Moshe did not praise their accomplishments. Rather, he advised introspection and the search for any hidden "roots" that might germinate and develop into full-blown evil. Moshe understood that a real leader offers praise when it is deserving, but does not shy away from critique when it is necessary. He told the people that they were doing great, but never to forget that there might be something sinister lurking in the innermost recesses of their hearts.

This idea is expressed by the Ben Ish Chai in his interpretation of the pasuk (29:28), "The hidden (sins) are for Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed (sins) are for us and our children forever." He said that if our innermost hidden thoughts are reserved for Hashem, then we can be secure that our niglos, our revealed actions, will be pure and untainted by the effect of the evil inclination. Consequently, we will merit that our positive actions will be transmitted to our offspring.

The later generation will say - your children who will arise after you and the foreigner who will come from a distant land. (29:21)

The Torah addresses the "later" generation, who will question the devastation that befell the Jewish People and their land. They will surmise that Klal Yisrael forsook Hashem for deities that were nothing more than figments of their imagination. This resulted in Hashem's reciprocal response. The Bais Halevi approaches this pasuk homiletically, but practically. He observes that one day "your children will arise -who will know as much about Jewish tradition and its noble heritage as the nachri, stranger/non-Jew." This, regrettably, is the gradual development of years of assimilation, years of lack of pride, years of attempting to fade into a society in which religion has no place and morals are obsolete. We might ask ourselves an accusing question: Are we that "later" generation?

One note that is worthy of consideration. Do parents have the license to rob their children of their heritage? Do they have the right, for reasons of their own, to prevent their children from learning about their religion - the religion for which so many Jews throughout the millenia have died? Children are a gift from the Almighty, the same One these parents have chosen to ignore. Having children is a privilege; raising them in accordance with their heritage is a responsibility.

The hidden (sins) are for Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed (sins) are for us and our children. (29:28)

Simply, we are not responsible for the hidden sinners, for those who conceal their evil. We will, however, be called to task for the actions of those who openly rebel. We are all responsible to maintain the integrity of Klal Yisrael. We suggest another interpretation of this pasuk. Those thoughts that are concealed within us, thoughts which we are astute enough not to express, belong to the Almighty. They exercise no influence on those around us, they hurt no one but ourselves. They are between us and G-d. Our revealed actions reflect the thoughts that we could not or did not contain. The subliminated ideas that we translated into practice, conduct that regrettably we allowed others to see, will unfortunately be transmitted to our children. How many realize only too late the hypocrisy to which their children were subjected as they were growing up? Alas, it is too late, because "haniglos lanu u'levaneinu," the revealed sins are for us and our children. By the time that we have decided to repent, our children have already been stricken with the malady of spiritual dysfunction.

What does the parent do when he finally decides to perform teshuvah and repent for his previous misdeeds? He has already done irreparable damage to his children. Is there any way to undo this harm? What he should not do is offer flimsy excuses to justify his actions. Today's young people are astute, seeing right through the sham. They expect sincere remorse, regret and shame. They expect integrity in teshuvah; they seek the truth. If a parent has the courage to say that he was weak, then his child will respect his strength of character. This might bring him back in response to the manifest integrity.