

# ***PENINIM ON THE TORAH***

## **PARSHA BOOKLET**

*Rabbi H. Leib Scheinbaum*

### **PARASHAT VAYELECH**

*So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to Bnei Yisrael, place it in their mouth. (31:19)*

The Torah refers to itself as a song. Why? Horav Sholom Yosef Elyashiv, Shlita, explains that the Torah is likened to a song, because it is to be written in a manner that makes it accessible to every member of Klal Yisrael. He applies the following analogy to explain this. A distinguished scholar was coming to town to deliver a lecture. If his specialty was mathematics, medicine or any other scientific, scholarly field, it is highly unlikely that anyone, other than those specifically interested in that field, would attend the lecture. The remainder of the community would have no reason to attend, because the subject matter would not be of interest to them. If, however, a world-renowned singer were to come to town, everybody would show up at his concert. Even those who have no musical talent would be present, because each person, commensurate with his level of musical cognition could appreciate the songs, melodies and musical accompaniment.

In other words, some areas of endeavor that appreciated by everyone, and some are only appreciated by a few individuals who have a special interest in affinity to the subject matter. This is the meaning of the words simah b'fihem, "put it in their mouth." The Torah must be transmitted in such a manner that it is appreciated by all - on their individual intellectual and spiritual plateau. It is only when one teaches Torah as a shirah, song, in a manner suitable, palatable and appreciated by all, that he sees a siman brachah, sign of blessing, in his work. The students must sense a sweetness in the Torah - even if it is only on the elementary level. By placing it in their mouths, it will enter their hearts and minds and be integrated into their entire beings.

*And it shall be when many evils and distresses come upon it. (31:21)*

In the Talmud Chagigah 5A, Chazal make a startling comment concerning this pasuk. According to Tosfos' commentary, the cause of the many evils and distresses is a punishment for the person "who makes money available to a poor man when he is in dire need." What are Chazal teaching us? Is not sustaining the poor and down-trodden a staple of Jewish belief? How can supporting the poor man be reason for all the misery and distress that visits a person? Furthermore, this statement is in direct contradiction of another statement in the Talmud Yevamos 63A, where it is stated that one who

lends money to a poor man merits the reward expressed by Yeshayah HaNavi: "Then you will call out and Hashem will respond; you will cry out and He will say; 'Here I am.'" (Yeshayah 58:9). This pasuk makes it clear that helping the poor will increase our chances of being helped by Hashem. How do we reconcile these two seemingly disparate statements?

The Maggid, zl, m'Dubno, explains that, indeed, reaching out to the poor is an enviable and much needed act of kindness. There are, however, two ways to reach out, and only one is laudable. An individual notices that his friend's business is not doing well; he sees his friend is struggling with his livelihood, so he makes an attempt to assist him, by purchasing his products, sending him customers, or by investing in his business. In another instance, he might offer him a job, teach him a trade, or put in a good word with another employer. He does all of this to help, to increase his independence, to preserve his dignity. This is part of the mitzvah, V'hechezakta bah, "You shall strengthen him." (Vayikra 25:35)

Sometimes, however, this assistance arrives too late, when a person has waited too long to come to the aid of his friend. His business has already failed; his bank account is already dry; his food pantry is already empty. By that time, his friend is already down and out, going from door to door in utter humiliation, begging for alms - just to eat. This prolonged interval has reduced his friend to an emotional wreck. In some cases, it can even drive a person to do the unthinkable. Why? Because some self-righteous, arrogant individual decided that he would wait until the situation became desperate before offering his assistance.

In the case of the second "benefactor," Hashem responds middah k'negged middah, measure for measure. When this person cries out to Hashem for his personal needs, Hashem asks, "What took you so long when your friend needed assistance? Why did you wait until his dignity was totally destroyed before you decided it was time to help him? Now, you need assistance. It all about you. Well, you will have to wait - the same way you made your friend wait." Hashem will help him, but it will be in the same manner and with the same compassion that he displayed to the other fellow.

In citing this penetrating exposition, Horav Avrohom Pam, zl, in the latest anthology of his shmuessen, ethical discourses, by Rabbi Sholom Smith, exhorts us all to be finely attuned to the needs of those around us who are struggling. Let us reach out with assistance, some advice, a good word, even a smile - before it is too late. The manner in which we respond to others, is the same manner in which Hashem will respond to us.

He cites the Rambam in Hilchos Matnas Aniyim (10:1,2) who makes some highly emotional remarks about the centrality of tzedakah, charity, in the life of a Jew. Of all of the mitzvos of the Torah, tzedakah stands out as being the legacy of Avraham Avinu. It is his unique characteristic which he bequeathed to his descendants. No person will suffer any loss or harm by giving charity. Indeed, it can only enrich him. Jews are like brothers, and if a Jew cannot turn to his brother for assistance, to whom else can he turn? These are powerful words from an individual that was naeh doreish u'naeh mekayeim, preached inspirational words and lived up to his preaching by personally practicing what he asked others to do.

The Rambam was a physician as well as a scholar. His devotion to people was consummate, and it gives us a glimpse of the level of chesed we must strive to emulate. What inspires me is the fact that Rav Pam dedicates a portion of his shmuess to the Rambam's reply to a letter sent to him by Rabbi Yehudah Ibn Tibbon, the translator of the Moreh Nevuchim, Guide to the Perplexed. The Rosh Yeshivah's overwhelming devotion to his fellow Jew and his outstanding love of chesed and commitment to helping anyone in need were legendary. He infused these wonderful qualities in his talmidim, students, and in all those who came in contact with him. Indeed, he was a wellspring of

loving kindness that nurtured all of those around him.

When Rabbi Yehudah completed the translation, he asked the Rambam for an appointment, so that he could discuss a number of issues that were troubling him. Under normal circumstances, any author whose work is being translated or interpreted by another person would insist on reading the final galleys to make sure that they coincide with what he had in mind when he wrote the original work. Surprisingly, the Rambam demurred, citing overwhelming responsibilities and a lack of time to fit anything else into his already hectic schedule. It seems that his day would stretch from before dawn until late at night, seeing to the ills of first the sultan's royal family and then the people in his community. His day did not end until very late. Shabbos was the day that he addressed the spiritual needs of his community. He simply could not fit anything else into his day.

The Rambam was a person who did not live for himself. His entire day was devoted to the physical and spiritual service of others. This was all executed at the expense of his own personal health and comfort. He was not only the embodiment of Torah as the codifier of the law for the generations, but he was also the consummate *ish ha'chesed*, man of lovingkindness.

Rav Pam felt that Horav Moshe Feinstein, *zl*, exemplified the dual qualities of the Rambam. As the *posek ha'dor*, halachic arbiter of the generation, he was the last word in interpreting Torah and Talmudic law, addressing some of the most difficult and compelling halachic dilemmas of the century. He was also a paragon of humility and exemplar of lovingkindness. No favor was too small, nor was no act of *chesed* too great. Rav Moshe always found time and made the effort to help. This was in addition to replying to thousands of halachic questions that found their way to him from all over the world. Yet, he still found the time to learn! When people asked him how he maintained the physical stamina to continue along on this super human pace, he responded, *Vi lang mir kenen tuhn, darf min tuhn*, "As long as we can do, we must do." These are timely words of wisdom that we should take to mind and to heart.

*So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Bnei Yisrael. (31:19)*

The Talmud Megillah 3A relates the incident in which Yehoshua was laying siege to Yericho, when he met an angel at night. The angel said to him, "This evening you neglected the *Korban Tamid Shel Bein Ha'Arbaim*, Afternoon sacrifice, and now you have neglected the study of Torah." Yehoshua asked, "In regard to which (of these two sins) have you come?" The angel answered, "Ata basi," "I have come now." Immediately, the next night, (Rashi) Yehoshua studied Torah. The Rivin in Tosfos explains the relationship between the word *ata*, "now," and Torah study, as being derived from the above *pasuk*, *V'ata*, so now, *kisvu es ha'shirah ha'zos*, "Write this song for yourselves." Chazal teach us that "this song" is a reference to the Torah. We wonder why the angel cited this *pasuk* to emphasize the sin of *bitul Torah*, wasting time from studying Torah. Surely, there are other *pesukim* that state the preeminence of Torah study in our lives. What was the angel alluding to with this *pasuk*?

The Ponevezer Rav, *zl*, explains that from the perspective of Torah study alone, quite possibly Yehoshua could have found a dispensation for not studying at that time. After all, it was during a war. They were in the midst of the battlefield in the dead of night. There was sufficient reason to forego any critique concerning their laxity in Torah study. There was an aspect of Torah study, however, which they were missing. Torah is called *shirah*, song. Just as a melody is refreshing, exciting and pulsating, so too, does the Torah add excitement and vibrance to one's life. One who views the Torah as a song

will never recuse himself from learning. How could he? It is his life! During battle, deprivation, and throughout any time frame or period, one finds time to study Torah. It is not merely an intellectual pursuit. It is chayim!

The angel criticized Yehoshua for the lack of the v'ata, "and now," referring to the Shira, the song, that Torah is to be. Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl, would often relate from Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl, who commented, "I cannot fathom any greater enjoyment in Gan Eden than a shtender, a book stand, with a Talmud Nedarim with the commentary of the Ran opened on it." This was life to him! No joy, no sense of satisfaction was comparable to the passion he felt through cheshkas haTorah, desire to study Torah. He is impervious to the extraneous hustle and bustle of the world around him. He was content with immersing himself in the sweet melody of the song of Torah.

The Klausenberger Rebbe, zl, was well known for his boundless love of Torah. This was demonstrated by the manner in which he davened, especially when he recited the tefillah of Ahavas olam. He would begin by beseeching Hashem to have mercy on us, and then he would slowly articulate each request accompanied by a torrent of tears. "Please, Hashem," he would supplicate, "V'tein b'libeinu. 'Place in our hearts (the ability and desire) 'l'avin, to understand, lishmoa, to listen, lilmod, to learn, u'lelamed, and to teach." He would then collapse in uncontrollable weeping as if he were bent over begging for his life. In truth, he was - because he knew no life other than a life of Torah. Without it, he was not alive.

*For I shall bring them to the land that I swore for their forefathers... and (they) will turn to gods of others and serve them...It shall be when many evils and distresses come upon it...for I know its inclination, what it does today. (31:21,22)*

The pesukim depict the situation and religious climate among the people even before they enter the Promised Land. Rather than sense a feeling of anticipation and holiness in preparation for this seminal event, they turn instead to idols, to the gods of others, to foolishness and absurdity. Afterwards, they have no idea why they are plagued with evils and distresses. Hashem relates that everything is a direct consequence of man's deference to his yetzer hora, evil inclination. We seek out alien cultures, hoping that we will ingratiate ourselves to them, not that they will help us. It is all upon the counsel and guile of the yetzer hora that manipulates us according to its goals. Moshe Rabbeinu presents all of this in the Torah, so that the people will have a clear and lucid picture of what will occur when they are drawn by their yetzer hora to the cultures of surrounding societies. They will wonder why all this is happening to them. The answer will be in the Torah - if they are willing to listen. For some, however, it will be too late.

Horav Eliyahu Schlessinger, Shlita, sees a deeper message in these pesukim, a message that is both timely and pragmatic. The nature of man is to search for a reason whenever something dreadful occurs. He must rationalize everything. He will blame everyone and everything. The last thing that will enter his mind is to blame himself for what has occurred. He is the righteous person, he is faultless. Everybody else is evil, he is a saint. If it sounds familiar, it is because we are all guilty of this offense. At one time or another, we will lay the blame at everyone's doorstep but our own. This pattern has, regrettably, been our trademark throughout history.

The Torah is conveying to us that we are wrong. If you wonder why we are suffering; why we

are inundated with distress; why we are plagued with one crisis after another? The answer is that we are to blame; we caused the problem, we initiated the consequence. Hashem recognizes our inclination and knows how low and how far one will go to satisfy the burning desire created by his yetzer hora. Before we lay blame where it does not belong, let us look in the mirror and see from where it all starts.

We derive this lesson from Yonah Ha'Navi. He was traveling by ship, when a raging storm threatened to sink the ship and all of its passengers. Everyone prayed to his own god to no avail. They decided to throw lots to see if this would reveal the reason for the storm. The lot fell on Yonah. They asked him what he had done to incur the wrath of the Almighty. Yonah conceded that he was to blame and had them throw him overboard. Incredible! The ship was filled with idolaters of every shape and form. Certainly, the travelers were not all members of the righteous elite. Yonah could have easily made light of the lottery and blamed any number of people. He did not. Surely, his infraction paled in comparison with those of his fellow passengers. He could have kept quiet and ignored them. He did not, because he did not shirk his responsibility. He had erred, and he would accept the blame. The sooner one owns up to his responsibility, the quicker he can implement the changes necessary to put his mistakes behind him.

*At the end of seven years, at the time of the Shemittah year, in the festival of Succos...Assemble the nation; men, women, and children...that they may hear and that they may learn and come to fear Hashem, your G-d, and that they will observe to do all the words of this Torah. (31:10,12)*

The entire nation convened for a learning experience, which was to imbue the people with a fear of G-d and engender greater commitment to mitzvah observance. The mitzvah of Hakhel was set for the beginning of the eighth year, immediately following the Shemittah, Sabbatical year, during the festival of Succos. The timing of this event seems to be by specific design. What is the significance of scheduling Hakhel immediately following Shemittah on Succos? It is doubtful that the people were expected to make another trip to Yerushalayim. Since they were already there for Succos, they might as well celebrate Hakhel. The commentators sense a strong intended connection between Shemittah and the impact that the Hakhel experience was to have on the Nation.

In his Akeidas Yitzchak, Horav Yitzchak Aramah, zl suggests that Hakhel was to catalyze a greater awareness of the power of Hashem. This increased yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven, would encourage the people to greater observance of and reverence for the Torah. What better time than after the purification process that began on Rosh Hashanah and continued through Yom Kippur and Succos? Following a year of allowing the land to rest, in which the anxiety concerning how they would be sustained was finally over, they could look back at how -- through their faith and commitment -- they were now able to merit the blessings that accompany Shemittah. They were primed and ready to listen and accept with love all that the Torah demands of them. They could see retroactively how a life of Torah is a life of blessing for them.

Then there are our children. If we want our children to follow along the path of observance, then they must see and learn from our level of commitment. In order for our children to adopt our values, they must witness our sense of mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, for these values. Most of all, they must observe sincerity and integrity in mitzvah performance. How often do we destroy an education for which we have spent thousands of dollars, by doing something foolish in the presence of our children -

just to save a few dollars? Sending our children to the finest schools, paying for the best rebbeim, is a lesson in futility every time they are aware that we are really not genuinely committed, and are willing to lie or cheat to get a discount or a better price. While we might find an excuse for our misbehavior, our children have already lost out. They must see mesiras nefesh, not hypocrisy.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twersky relates the story of a first generation eastern European couple who came to this country with their spiritual values intact. There was integrity in their spiritual commitment, mesiras nefesh in their mitzvah observance and emunah peshutah, simple, pure faith, in their belief in the Almighty. They might not have been erudite, but they were deeply devout. Once, the mikveh in the community broke down, and the community leaders took excessive time correcting the problem. What did this simple couple do? The husband moved out of the house and did not return until the mikveh was repaired. While regrettably many of their descendants did not maintain their adherence to Torah and mitzvos, their commitment to this one mitzvah of mikveh has been unwavering. Because they witnessed mesiras nefesh and they heard about this mesiras nefesh, it remained imbedded in their hearts and souls.

Horav Moshe Reis, Shlita, supplements this idea. He notes that the phrase, "At the end of seven years," is mentioned earlier in 15:1 concerning Shemittas kesafim, remission of all loans, during the Shemittah year. This is a remarkable mitzvah which leaves a compelling impression on the individual. To cancel all loans, to see one's hard-earned money in another person's hands and not to do a thing about it, is incredible. Furthermore, one may not refrain from lending another Jew money, knowing full well that Shemittah cancels the loan. Is there a mitzvah that empowers middos tovos, refined character traits, more than this one? Hence, at the Hakhel ceremony, all Jews stood together, their middos already refined and tempered. Their bitachon, trust, in the Almighty had certainly been galvanized. Thus, we have achdus, unity, among Jews and bitachon, trust, in Hashem: two ingredients that render this Hakhel experience unprecedented and unparalleled.

We add to this the festival of Succos, which, among its numerous lessons, underscores the frailty and impermanence of our material resources. As we move out of the stability of our homes and settle into a flimsy hut, we realize that the only permanence in our lives, is the stability and security that accompany our trust in Hashem. Shemittah and Succos are two moments in time that convey the timeless messages of Yiraas Shomayim and bitachon in Hashem.

*Hashem spoke to Moshe, "Behold your days are drawing near to die." (31:14)*

The Midrash Tanchuma comments, "Do then days die?" ("Behold your days are drawing near to die.") This is a reference to the righteous, for when they pass from this world, essentially, it is their "days" that are eliminated from this world, but they themselves live on. Tzaddikim, the righteous, are considered alive, even after they die; on the other hand, reshaim, the wicked, are considered dead, even when they are alive. This is because when the rasha sees the sun rise, he does not make a blessing, and when he sees it set, he also does not make a blessing. He eats and drinks, but does not bless Hashem Who provides him with sustenance. The righteous man, however, blesses Hashem at every juncture. When he eats, drinks, sees, hears, he always thinks of Hashem and proclaims His praise. This continues even after he has left this corporeal world, as David HaMelech says in Sefer Tehillim 149:5, "Let the devout exalt in glory, let them sing joyously upon their beds."

A fascinating Midrash with a profound message follows. Horav Meir Rubman, Shlita, gleans a

powerful lesson from Chazal. Previously, we have been led to think that the definition of one who is alive is one who eats, drinks, sees and hears. One who does not possess these abilities is basically not among the living. Not so, says the Midrash. According to Chazal, only a person who recites a brachah, blessing, prior to eating and drinking -- who, when he hears or sees something, conveys his profound appreciation by blessing the One Who gave him the ability to hear and see - is alive! One who is alive senses Hashem's Presence and responds with a blessing. One who does not bless Hashem is not alive!

Consequently, we can deduce from here that the quality of one's life is defined by how he blesses: how much enthusiasm, fervor and conviction he puts into the brachah. One who blesses passionately - lives. One who blesses complacently - exists. His life lacks vibrance. He needs to be resuscitated, to be spiritually revived before it is too late.

Shlomo HaMelech says in Koheles 9:4, "A live dog is better than a dead lion." Simply this means that hope exists for one who is connected to life. He can grow spiritually. Regardless of his lowly nature and circumstance, as long as he is alive, he can climb up out of the muck that envelops him. When we follow the text and read the next pasuk, however, we develop a deeper understanding of the meaning of life. "For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing at all." The living dog has another advantage over the dead lion: He is aware that life precedes death. A person who lives life with the spectre of death looming over him has a completely different life experience than one for whom life is an end in itself. He who aspires to eternal life knows that following his sojourn in this world, there is a glorious reward of eternal life in store for him - if he has lived properly. Such a life has meaning, value and hope. He who lives as if there is no tomorrow, and no life after death, does not really live. He has already traded away his life.

There is no shortage of stories of people who have "lived" each mitzvah to the fullest. I recently read a captivating story by Rabbi Yechiel Spero in "Touched By A Story " that demonstrates how a person can live in the shadow of death, not knowing what tomorrow will bring, yet be forever hopeful that if there is a tomorrow, he would serve Hashem with his entire being.

It was almost Chanukah, 1944, when the Satmar Rebbe, zl, was transferred to freedom from his internship in Bergen Belsen as part of the famous "Kastner Transport." Together with a small group of Jews, he was taken to the city of Caux in Switzerland to be checked for disease. Excitement reigned as members of the group prepared for their first festival in five years to be celebrated out of captivity. After a group of influential Jews intervened on their behalf, the Rebbe and his entourage were permitted to go to Montreaux to the home of a respected lay leader to light the first Chanukah candle.

When the Rebbe arrived, he was immediately offered food and drink, which he refused. He was interested in only one thing - lighting the menorah. He immediately went over to the menorah that had been meticulously prepared for him, and, with trembling hands, he carefully reached into his pocket and removed his makeshift wick. He replaced the menorah's wick with his own, explaining, "Several weeks ago, when I was interned in the concentration camp, I had no idea where I would be for Chanukah, or if I would even have the opportunity to light a candle. So, I began saving threads for wicks, in the outside chance that an opportunity would arise for me to celebrate the festival of Chanukah. I have been carrying this wick with me, saving it for this purpose."

Those assembled watched silently as the Rebbe began to sway, his body here, but his mind elsewhere. Tears began to slowly flow down his face, as he recited the first two brachos in an emotional and heartbroken voice. As he began the third brachah, the blessing of Shehechyanu, "that He has kept us alive," the tears began to flow even more, for the Rebbe could no longer contain his emotions. His tears of gratitude for having lived, mingled together with the tears of pain a torrent of heartbroken sobs

for those who did not survive. Finally, the Rebbe concluded the brachah. Emotionally drained, but with heartfelt inner joy, he looked at the bright flame of the shining Chanukah light, a symbol of hope and strength and pride in the Jewish nation.

*It shall be when many evils and distresses come upon it. (31:21)*

In the End of the Days, in the period preceding the advent of Moshiach Tzidkeinu, Klal Yisrael will be besieged by a volley of distresses. Why is this? The Maggid, zl, m'Dubno gives an insightful analogy to explain this phenomenon. At the end of the day, the fruit peddler is in a rush to close his stand and go home. He takes whatever fruits remain, and he puts them all into one basket to sell at half price, because he wants to get rid of them. Likewise, when Klal Yisrael sees a potpourri of distresses befalling them, evils and afflictions of all kinds, it is a sign that Moshiach Tzidkeinu is near. The End of the Days are upon us and we finally are to prepare to go home.

*Behold! While I am still alive with you today, you have been rebels against G-d, and surely after my death. (31:27)*

The Bais HaLevi explains that when one sins, he creates a sort of second nature, a gravitational pull to that sin. Once he has fallen into the clutches of the yetzer hora, evil inclination, he is more likely to fall again, since his desire for that sin has become more innate. Likewise, his actions create a blemish in the cosmos in which this sin now has greater power. In other words, an individual sin has a negative effect not only on the sinner, but it also directly influences those who view the act and indirectly creates a negative cosmic imprint on the world.

Alternatively, when one performs a mitzvah, he not only increases his personal proclivity to do good, but he also creates a positive cosmic impression, by which it will now be easier for others to triumph over their yetzer hora and gravitate toward activities of a positive nature. Thus, the tzaddik, by his numerous mitzvos, creates a positive surge in the spiritual sphere, which is reflected in increased activity in the area of mitzvos and good deeds.

Moshe Rabbeinu voiced his concerns with regard to the future. He lamented the fact that even during his lifetime, when there should have been a greater tendency towards a positive spiritual experience, the people, nonetheless, rebelled. How much more so should he be disturbed that, with his passing, the situation would deteriorate.

*For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, and you will stray from the path that I have commanded you. (31:29)*

Moshe Rabbeinu predicted that following his passing from this world, the nation would veer from its commitment to Hashem and act corruptly. While this did not occur immediately after Moshe's death, it did come to pass following the death of his student and successor, Yehoshua. We wonder why Moshe found it necessary to rebuke Klal Yisrael about their actions following his death? His concern should be for the here and the now - not for the future. Otzros HaTorah gives an insightful explanation

for this. He cites the following story:

There was a custom in the city of Vilna that the wealthy Jews would arrange to marry off their children in a beautiful hall near the outskirts of the city. The architecture was impressive, the ambiance was exquisite, and the food was lavish as befits the wedding of a wealthy person. It happened once that a shoemaker who had struck it rich decided that now he, too, could marry off his daughter at this fancy wedding hall. After all, now that he had the means, why should he be any different than any of the other wealthy men in the city? His attitude drew the ire of the wealthy members of the community. They could not tolerate this man's sudden rise from rags to riches. For him to have the audacity to marry off his daughter in the hall reserved for the indigenous wealthy was too much for them to bear. As the wedding party was returning from the chupah, filled with joy and good cheer, one of the wealthy men went over to the father of the kallah, took off his "torn" shoe, and, in front of everyone asked him how much it would cost to have it repaired.

The public humiliation of this person spread around the city. When Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl, founder of the mussar, ethical development, movement heard about the incident, he exclaimed, "I am certain that the distinguished Torah leaders of the previous generation who are presently reposing in Gan Eden are now being called to task for not fulfilling their responsibility to the community. Had they carried out their obligation to teach the people and to raise their awareness of sensitivity to others, this tragedy would never have occurred."

We can now understand Moshe's concern with the nation's behavior after his death. A leader does not lead only for the present. He must inspire his charges, so that they remain infused with the lessons and behavior that he has taught them, even long after he is gone.

*Gather together the people, the men, women and the small children. (31:12)*

The mitzvah of Hakhel took place once every seven years on the first day of Chol Hamoed Succos following a Shemittah year. Everyone was included in this mitzvah: men, women and even the small children. As Chazal state, "The men came to learn; the women came to listen; the children came to give reward to those who brought them." The Malbim explains the benefit the children had in attending the Hakhel experience. Although they could not understand the proceedings, their eyes would be glued to the awesome sight of millions of Jews gathered together for the sole purpose of hearing the Dvar Hashem, Word of G-d. This would leave an indelible impression on them, inspiring them to lead lives of kedushah v'taharah, holiness and purity.

While the mitzvah of Hakhel is not in effect today, Horav Avraham Pam, zl, suggests that its message is eternal and certainly worth contemplating. A child develops a love for what he sees his parents cherish. When a child sees his father learning, he develops a love of learning. When a child notices his father is not at home and, after asking where he is, he hears that his father is in the bais hamedrash learning, he, in turn, also wants to learn. On the other hand, if he notices his father spending his time doing everything else but learning, the message he will derive is, regrettably, clearly negative. Parents have an enormous responsibility in raising their children in the Torah way. Rav Pam cites the Viddui, confession prayer, that we recite on Yom Kippur, "Al cheit she'chatanu le'fanecha b'prikas ol. "For the sin that we have sinned against You in throwing off the yoke." The simple meaning is that this is a reference to the yoke of Heaven. Rav Pam understands this also as a confession for renegeing the yoke of parenthood. The responsibility is awesome; the challenge is formidable, but that is the essence

of parenting. Nachas does not just happen. One has to work and work for it. At times, we allow our guard to slip, as we defer to the many pressures of life and child-rearing. Our children are our most precious possessions. It is up to us to make the correct decisions for them, not necessarily based upon what is easiest and best for us. All too often, our decisions are mired by the "What are others going to say?" syndrome. If we care for our children, we will do what is best for them and not what enhances our image. Parenting is an endeavor which does not allow much room for error, so it would be best that we make the correct and proper decisions the first time around.

*Gather to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers. (31:28)*

Rashi comments that the chatzotzros, trumpets, were used that day to assemble the people. These trumpets were made exclusively for Moshe Rabbeinu's use and Yehoshua did not have authority over them. Indeed, they were hidden by Hashem during Moshe's lifetime in fulfillment of Shlomo HaMelech's dictum in Koheles 5:6, "And there is no rulership on the day of death." The Midrash in the end of Sefer Bereishis emphasizes that Hashem hid Moshe's trumpets to ensure that no one else would use them. Horav Mordechai Ilan, zl, explains that every leader is endowed with specific qualities, abilities and talents that will assist him in leading his generation. What works for his generation will not necessarily succeed in the next generation. His trumpets are for his use during his tenure as leader. With his passing, the baton is passed to the next leader who has his own trumpets which are suitable for use in his specific generation. Every generation has its Moshe Rabbeinu, and every Moshe has his singular trumpet.

*And I will conceal My face from them... But I will have surely concealed My face on that day.  
(31:17,18)*

Klal Yisrael acknowledges that its troubles are the result of Hashem removing His Presence from their midst. Their acknowledgement does not suffice to effect Hashem's return. It is only through sincere teshuvah, repentance, preceded by Vidui, confession, that Hashem's concealment will end. How does one bring Hashem into his life? How does one make the Shechinah, Divine Presence, a factor in his daily life? Horav Moshe Swift, zl, cites a fascinating Chazal in the end of Meseches Makkos 24A, which sheds light on our query. David HaMelech in Tehillim 15 describes the ideal Jewish personality. "Who shall sojourn in Your tent, who shall dwell upon Your holy mountain?" David HaMelech goes on to detail the quintessential Jewish character; "Walking uprightly, working righteousness, speaking truth in his heart, having no slander on his tongue, nor doing any evil to his fellow." He concludes, "He who does these things shall never be moved." Chazal relate that when Rabban Gamliel would approach this chapter in Tehillim, he would weep, saying, "Is it only he that does all these things that shall not be moved? Does this imply that he who does only one of these, that he is moved?"

The reply was, "No, No, David HaMelech does not say that he must do all these things. Even if a man observes only one thing, if he demonstrates one quality, but he does it wholeheartedly -- because it is Hashem's command -- then he shall not be moved for eternity." In his Peirush HaMishnayos, the Rambam adds, "If a person fulfills any one of the Taryag Mitzvos, 613 commandments, as it should be fulfilled, without any ulterior motive or improper intention of any possible kind, but purely for the sake

of the mitzvah and for the love of G-d's commands, he thereby becomes worthy of eternal life."

The Rambam asserts that Rav Chanania ben Teradyon, one of the Asarah Harugei Malchus, Ten Martyrs, earned his portion in Olam Habah, not because of his martyrdom, but, rather, because of one mitzvah that he performed completely lishmah, for the sake of Heaven, without any vestige of personal interest, only for the love of Hashem and fulfillment of His command!

What a powerful thought. If we want to bring the Shechinah into our midst, we just have to perform one mitzvah l'shem Shomayim. This brings G-d into our daily lives. It touches our homes and makes them a veritable Mishkan, Sanctuary. It permeates our lives as we cling to the Almighty. The Jew who acts l'shem Shomayim forges an unbreakable link between Heaven and earth.

Hashem conceals His Presence from us because we are not willing to repent. If we begin performing mitzvos in the correct and proper manner, however, we will merit His return, to bring Him back into our lives. Of course, we must observe all of the mitzvos, not just pick and choose what is most palatable. It is understood that we cannot maintain the correct kavanah, attitude, towards all mitzvos. If we take one mitzvah and perform it correctly, l'shem Shomayim, we will be privileged to bring Hashem into our lives, so that we can continue performing the rest of the mitzvos properly - for Hashem.

*And I will conceal My face from them...it will say on that day, "Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?" (31:17)*

The Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, Ten Days of Repentance, the first ten days of the New Year, are meant to be the foundation-stone for the coming year. It is the standard upon which our behavior during the year should be based. Hashem is karov, close, to us during this time. Thus, this period is to imbue us to develop a personal relationship with the Almighty - throughout the year. There is no room in Yiddishkeit for intermediaries. One should feel a sense of nearness with Hashem. With this feeling in mind, no Jew should ever feel alone. This idea is alluded to in the Divine warning conveyed to Moshe Rabbeinu shortly before he bade farewell to the nation that he had cared for during these past forty years. The time would come when the people would say "because my G-d is not in my midst," when they would no longer feel Hashem's presence among them.

Our first error is in thinking that Hashem has left us. Hashem is always there. It is we who have turned away. The Navi emphasizes, "And know that I am in the midst of Yisrael." I have not turned away My face; you have turned yours away. Come back, return to me. Do not be ashamed. Return to Davening, to Tallis and Tefillin, to Torah study, to Shabbos. You can still walk hand in hand with Hashem as long as you perform teshuvah, repentance.

Shuvah, simply put, means to return. If you turn your back on someone, you have simply to turn around and look him in the face. During the Ten Days of Repentance we are enjoined to "turn around and face Hashem."

Teshuvah is never easy, but when one realizes that Hashem is waiting to accept his return, it becomes that much easier. It must be made clear, however, that this only applies to sins that one has committed against the Almighty. For the sins that we have committed against our fellowman, there is only one way out: find the victim of our aggression and beg his forgiveness. If he is no longer on this world, we must take a minyan, quorum of ten men, to his grave and make a public confession. It is not

pleasant, and we never know when our time is up. So, why wait?

It is a serious mistake to think that we can conduct ourselves during the day as we see fit, as long as we go to shul, daven, maintain a chavrusa, study partner, and give charity. The malignancy that eats away at religious life is our attitude towards separating the sacred from the mundane. We have to sanctify ourselves throughout the entire day and never ignore our relationship with our fellow man.

Much is taken for granted in the world of commerce. Society makes constant demands on our financial resources and, regrettably, people resort to various approaches towards earning the almighty dollar. Most of the time these approaches are scrupulous. What happens when we are up against the wall? Are we as careful with someone else's money as we are with our own? Are we as concerned about someone else's feelings as we are with our own? Do we ever take advantage of another person who is not as financially astute or as aggressive as we are? I am not even talking about the government.

Moshe Rabbeinu laments, "You will do evil in G-d's eyes and provoke Him through the work of your hands." This does not only mean that we will do things wrong to provoke Hashem with our hands. It may also mean that our "hand," the handshake, the word we give someone, will no longer have any value or meaning. A word is no longer a word; a commitment no longer carries any weight.

The Navi exhorts us to Kechu imachem devarim v'shuvu el Hashem - "Take with yourselves words and return to Hashem." Stick to your resolutions; translate them into practice. As the New Year begins, we make resolutions and commitments. Some last until Succos. We give our word, but does it really mean anything? Take the words with you. Make them a part of your life, and, hopefully, your life will change.

*At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of Shemittah, in the Festival of Succos... You shall read this law before all Yisrael in their ears. (31:11)*

The mitzvah of Hakheil, convening of Klal Yisrael at the beginning of the eighth year, immediately following the Shemittah year, is set at this time by design. The timing of this event, when all Jews gathered together to hear the Torah read by the Melech Yisrael, Jewish king, was scheduled to impart the greatest impression. What is unique about this time?

Horav Mordechai Rogov, zl, explains that after Klal Yisrael has experienced a year of Shemittah, a year of unparalleled faith and trust in the Almighty, they are now attuned to hear and accept what the Torah had to say. They had just completed an entire year when their daily sustenance was always a question in their minds. "What shall we eat during the seventh year?" they would ask. They survived - and thrived, despite the daily anxiety regarding their subsistence. It now dawned on them that they "made it" without plowing, planting or harvesting. They did nothing! Yet, they had what they needed because Hashem, as usual, took care of their needs. It was their faith in Hashem that carried them through the year.

Is it any wonder that after such an incredible year of faith and apparent blessings they were primed and ready to listen to the word of Hashem?

This idea rings true every time we successfully navigate the sea of ambiguity and pain and come to the realization that Hashem has been there with us throughout our ordeal. As the nation now understood that Torah fulfillment would serve for their ultimate benefit, so, too, should we accept the fact that whatever we have is from Hashem. Our response should be clear and unequivocal. As the

people now have come to realize that Shabbos and Shemittah, as well as involvement in any other mitzvah, does not detract from our material success, but, instead, guarantees it, so should we strengthen our resolve and commitment towards Torah observance. Mitzvah observance reinforces a sense of confidence and security that they are not only a means of serving Hashem, but also rungs in the ladder which leads to success and fulfillment. In truth, every encounter with Hashem's beneficence should engender within us feelings of hope and courage in the knowledge that Hashem is always there for us.

*Moshe went. (31:1)*

It was Moshe Rabbeinu's last few hours as a mortal and he "walked." This is the end of his life. The genesis of the Jewish "movement" opens with Hashem's enjoinder to Avraham, "Lech Lecha," go for /to yourself. (Bereishis 12:1) Interestingly, the Torah begins with "Lech lecha" - going - and ends with "Vayelech Moshe" - Moshe going. The concept of halichah, going/ walking, implies a means to an end. One walks somewhere. The walking is the means by which he arrives. It is not a goal in itself - or is it? Avraham is told to "go;" Moshe on his last day is "going." It is as if Moshe is continuing Avraham's lech lecha and does so until his heart stops beating. Is "going" a Jewish concept?

In the ethical discourses of Bais Sholom Mordechai the notion is submitted that the Torah demands of us "halichah" - that we "go." The actual halichah is an end in itself. We are commanded to move - not to arrive. The results of our moving, the consequences of our endeavors should not be the focus of our thoughts. Our function is to do - Hashem will see to the results. We are to be "holech b'derachav," go in His ways. The results are for Hashem to determine. We only listen - and go. We are rewarded for the toil and effort - not the result.

*So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Bnei Yisrael, place it in their mouth. (31:19)*

"Simah b'fihem," "place it in their mouth" - this means that we are to make certain that our students are well-versed and thoroughly grasp the Torah. A rebbe, Torah teacher, must review the material as often as needed to ensure that his students are proficient and fully understand the lesson. Chazal teach us about the famous Rav Preida who had a student whose capacity for grasping his Torah lesson was so limited that Rav Preida would have to review the lesson with him four hundred times. Once Rav Preida had to leave to perform a mitzvah. The student, sensing that his rebbe was about to leave, had a more difficult time than usual in comprehending the lesson. Every moment, it seemed that Rav Preida was leaving, causing the student's mind to wander.

Rav Preida was not deterred. He told his student, "Do not worry. I will not leave you," and he proceeded to review the lesson another four hundred times! A voice from Heaven came forth and declared, "You (Rav Preida) may choose your reward from one of two choices: You will either be granted four hundred more years of life; or you, and every member of your generation, will merit Olam Haba, the eternal World to Come." Rav Preida chose the latter, and was subsequently rewarded from Heaven with both rewards.

We wonder why Hashem granted Rav Preida both rewards. His response was correct, for, regardless of one's lifespan, his life on this temporary world is of little consequence in comparison to Olam Haba. Everyone is acutely aware of the significance of the eternal world. What did Rav Preida do

that warranted a dual reward?

Horav Yosef Zundel Salant, zl, explains that once Rav Preida was given the opportunity to enter Olam Haba together with his generation, he was willing to "be mevater," relinquish, his chance for longevity - despite the incredible opportunity for personal spiritual advancement. Because he surrendered his own ambitions for the common good, he was doubly rewarded. Hashem did not want him to lose his reward because he was so devoted to the general community.

Putting the community first is an awesome challenge - one which is not easily surmounted. We live in a society which lauds taking care of "number one." Torah agrees that our focus should be first on "number one." It does, however, have a different perspective on Who is number one.

Our Torah leaders understood that greatness was measured by where one placed himself. If the community came first and only then, when everyone's needs were addressed, did he care about his personal needs, then he was worthy of distinction. The Satmar Rebbe, zl, would often relate how a chassid once came to the Sanzer Rav, zl. The Rav asked him, "To which rebbe are you traveling?" "I am going to the Shiniyaver Rav (the son of the Sanzer)." "You are going to my Yechezkele? He is a rebbe? What makes him a rebbe?" the Sanzer asked. "His avodas ha'kodesh, service to Hashem, and Torah study makes him a rebbe," the chassid answered. "No. Neither Torah study nor exceptional devotion transforms one into a leader. Everybody has to serve Hashem without exception. What distinguishes him?" the Sanzer countered.

This went back and forth. Every time the chassid would mention an episode in which the Shiniyaver was exemplary, his father would disregard it. Finally, the chassid reminded himself of an episode worthy of a leader. It was a freezing wintry day and a poor man met the Shiniyaver on the street in the middle of a snowstorm. The Shiniyaver took a look at the man's shoes and noticed that he was not wearing boots. His shoes, or at least what was left of them, were soaked and snow covered. Realizing that the poor man could not traverse the city seeking alms because of his shoe problem, the Shiniyaver removed his own shoes and gave them to the poor man. The poor man could now continue begging and the Shiniyaver was left in the street without boots. When the Sanzer heard this, he declared, "Anyone who ignores his own plight and thinks first of others, is worthy of being a rebbe."

*Hashem said to Moshe behold, your days are drawing near to die. (31:14)*

The Midrash asks, "Do 'days' die?" People die - not days. This refers to the righteous, who, although when they leave this world and their days are over, they still are considered alive. The righteous are considered alive, even in death, while the wicked are viewed as lifeless and dead even when they are alive." The Midrash continues explaining the difference between the righteous and the wicked in regard to the concept of life and death. The rasha, wicked person, sees the sun shine, but he does not make the blessing of Yotzeir Ohr, He creates light; he sees the sun set, but he does not make the blessing HaMaariv Aravim, who brings on evenings; he eats and drinks, but he does not have the decency to recognize the source of his food, and, consequently, he does not bless Hashem. In contrast, the righteous make a point to bless Hashem at every juncture. Wherever they eat or drink, what ever they see or hear, they always bless the Almighty. They do not express their gratitude and recognition only during their lifetime. They even praise Hashem when they are in their eternal rest, as David Ha'Melech says in Tehillim 149, "Let the devout exalt in glory; let them sing joyously upon their beds."

From this Midrash we derive a profound lesson regarding the true meaning of life and death. Horav Meir Rubman, zl, explains that the common definition for life is one who eats, drinks, sees and hears. One who does not possess these faculties, who is totally devoid of any physical activity is, to a great extent, lifeless. The Midrash does not seem to agree with this definition. Chazal teach us that life is based upon one's active participation in blessing Hashem for the bounty that he receives from Him. In other words, it is all in the heart, the seat of emotion and feeling. One who perceives, who feels alive, blesses Hashem. One whose sensitivity is dead, who does not feel obligated to bless Hashem, has a heart that might beat, but is lifeless.

One who blesses Hashem with devotion, with a sense of recognition, accepting that whatever he possesses or is able to do, be it physical activities or simple bodily functions, which so many of us take for granted, is alive. When one blesses haphazardly, devoid of feeling and devotion, his life is very much like his blessing - lifeless.

Shlomo HaMelech in Sefer Koheles 9:4 says, "A live dog is better than a dead lion." Simply, this means that while the dog is a lowly animal compared to the "king of beasts," it is still alive; it eats and drinks, runs and plays. The lion is dead and can do nothing. The analogy to a human being is that the lowliest person, regardless of his station in life, as long as he is alive and well, is better off than someone who is not as fortunate as he.

Shlomo HaMelech uses another barometer for distinguishing between the "living" dog and the "dead" lion. He says, "For the living know they will die, but the dead know nothing at all." It all boils down to perspective. The advantage of the living is that they know that they will one day leave their earthly abode. With this thought acutely impressed in their mind, they live their life.

*And many evils and troubles shall come upon them, and they shall say in that day, "Have not these evils come upon us because G-d is not among us?" And I will surely have concealed My face on that day. (31:17,18)*

These two pesukim begin by asserting Hashem's anger, followed by the concealment of His countenance as a result of Klal Yisrael's transgressions. Afterwards, when the nation recognizes that its suffering is due to Hashem's concealment, the next pasuk continues with Hashem concealing Himself once again. This is enigmatic. One would think that recognition of sin is a step towards teshuvah, repentance. Surely, it should not be followed with more hester Panim, concealment of Hashem's countenance. Indeed, this is a difficult and most tragic prophecy. What could be worse than Hashem removing Himself from our midst? It is softened only with the promise that, regardless of our infamy, Torah will not be forgotten from our People. Yet, the question still remains: Why would Hashem continue His concealment after we have taken that first step towards teshuvah?

Ramban explains that Klal Yisrael's acknowledgment of their iniquity falls short of genuine teshuvah. They realize that they have erred, but they still refuse to confess and repent wholeheartedly. A half-baked teshuvah will not effect a completely favorable response from the Almighty. We will have to do better than that. Although the Torah does not indicate any new punishment, we still do not merit Hashem's return.

Sforno explains that while Hashem conceals His presence, He will always be there to protect and preserve our People. We can, and still, should pray to Him, even during moments of hester Panim. Horav Bunim, zl, m'Peshischa, addresses this pasuk homiletically, maintaining that for a Jew to say that

Hashem is not in his midst is in itself a grave sin. No Jew should ever feel alone. No Jew has the right to say that Hashem has deserted him. Even during those moments of pain, terror and affliction, Hashem is with us.

I recently saw another approach towards understanding this pasuk. The question that has occupied the searching mind for generations, from Moshe Rabbeinu to the contemporary Jew, is, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" - and vice-versa. Moshe Rabbeinu asked Hashem, "Horeinu na derachecha." "Let me know Your ways." Indeed, Sefer Iyov focuses on this pivotal question - with the conclusion that there is no logical answer. It is a principle of faith that Hashem is just and compassionate. Those decisions that seem severe and cruel to us are beyond our limited scope of understanding. To believe in Hashem means to place our trust in Him even at those times when doing so challenges our cognitive abilities. Just because something does not make sense to us does not mean it does not make sense. We are limited by mortal parameters; Hashem certainly is not.

Regrettably, over time, some individuals have postulated that bad things happen to good people because, at times, Hashem "loses control." He cannot be everywhere all of the time. Therefore, some situations just seem to get away from Him. Such heresy is what we have come to expect from those who have alienated themselves from Torah and, consequently, from Hashem. Moshe Rabbeinu foresaw this breakdown in Jewish faith when he said, "They will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because G-d is not among us?'" We are cautioned not to err and think that tragedy is the result of Divine shortcoming or a lack of Hashem's Providence or Omnipotence. While it is true that there is no logical explanation for the bad things that happen to good people, we must depend upon our faith. Does religion always have to be logical? If so, why is it called religion? It is logical! Indeed, as is stated in the chassidische seforim, if Hashem would have felt that it was to our advantage to understand Hashem's ways, He would have availed us the ability to do so. Apparently, the leap of faith required of us to accept and justify Hashem's actions is a necessary component in our spiritual development.

*This song shall speak up before it as a witness, for it shall not be forgotten from the mouth of its offspring. (31:21)*

This is the only consolation for a prophecy foretelling Klal Yisrael's slide into a life of sin and rebellion against the Almighty. The Torah might be ignored; it might even be snubbed, but it will never be completely forgotten. Throughout history, there has always been a revival of Torah study following a period when many thought that its end was near. During the Holocaust of World War II, when Europe was burning, there were those doomsayers that said the end of Torah was near. It would die with European Jewry. This was not the case. Those who miraculously survived did not give in to depression and apathy. They realized that they were spared for a reason - to rebuild the Jewish nation, to develop thriving Torah centers that would educate the next generation of observant Jews, to see to it that "it shall not be forgotten from the mouth of its offspring."

Many stories recount the hardship, the emotion, the fear and the ultimate triumph connected with the near loss of our national heritage and its rejuvenation in this country. I feel that one very poignant story, cited by Rabbi Paysach Krohn, encapsulates these emotions. He writes about a Holocaust survivor who traveled from his home in the Midwest to Monsey, N.Y., to witness his grandson putting on Tefillin for the first time. This was a very special occasion for him, one that he did not want to miss.

They went that morning to the students' minyan at his grandson's school. Three generations: a grandfather, survivor of the Holocaust; a son, who grew up in the specter of the Holocaust; and a grandson, an American boy, who was continuing the legacy of previous generations. One can imagine the deep sense of pride and gratitude to Hashem that prevailed that morning. There was a deeper emotion, however, a pent-up emotion that lay dormant for years awaiting the moment when it could be expressed. It occurred as the young Bar-Mitzvah boy took out the Tefillin from its velvet pouch and, with the help of his father and under the watchful proud eyes of his grandfather, recited the blessing with enthusiasm and devotion, as he wrapped the Tefillin on his left arm.

Suddenly, the grandfather's eyes welled up with emotion and burst forth into tears. He did not just cry; he began to sob - loudly. For a few moments it seemed as if the grandfather's weeping was uncontrollable. After a while, he regained his composure and settled down to enjoy the simchah, special joyous moment. The grandson's rebbe took this all in. He cautiously approached the grandfather and said, "This must be a very emotional moment for you. To have survived the horrors of Hitler, to stand side by side with your son and grandson at this momentous occasion, must truly be overwhelming."

"In a way you are correct, but it was not my grandson who brought me to tears," responded the grandfather. "It is the sight of hundreds of boys davening together, raising their voices with "Amen," acknowledging the Almighty with gratitude, love and awe, that brought about my display of emotion. I remember an incident that took place back in 1945, soon after the war. I was one of the lucky ones to survive the destruction of the Vilna Ghetto. It was Simchas Torah, the festival when we rejoice with the Torah, when singing and dancing reign throughout the shul, when children joyfully dance with their flags. We had a minyan, but - there were no children. "We finished davening and were about to dance the Hakafos, traditional dance with the Sefer Torah, but - there was no Torah. No children - no Torah. The children did not survive, the Torah had either been looted or destroyed. What kind of Simchas Torah could a group of broken men have without children and without a Torah? We stared at each other in despair as the horrors of the past few years returned to haunt us.

"Suddenly, a young couple entered the shul with two little children, a boy and a girl. The poor girl's vocal cords had not developed properly, because she had been hiding in an attic for over a year, where she was only permitted to whisper quietly. We all stared at each other incredulously. We did not know who this couple was; we had never seen them before tonight. As they entered the shul, however, we realized that these children were our future. We scooped them up and, with tears of joy, we took turns dancing with them. They were our Hakafos, as we danced clutching these children to our hearts.

"As I look around this yeshivah today, and I see hundreds of living Sifrei Torah, I remember that fateful Simchas Torah. We were uncertain then of the future. We had hope, we aspired, we thirsted, but we did not know if our longing would ever achieve fruition. Today, I cry because I see that we have triumphed. We survived the horrors of the Holocaust, and we have rebuilt Torah in our communities. Today, I cry with joy and gratitude that Hashem allowed me to live to see and experience this moment."

This grandfather was one of thousands of survivors who feared that spiritual extinction would follow on the heels of the physical calamity that befell our People. They desperately worried that the Jewish nation was spiritually beyond help. It was no wonder that in the aftermath of such a cataclysmic destruction, this feeling was prevalent. Yet, there were those who remembered the pasuk. Hashem's promise that the Torah will never be forgotten. They toiled with blood, sweat and tears to rebuild the Torah centers of Europe. They undertook to build day schools throughout this country. The thriving educational institutions of today are a living testimony that the Torah will never be forgotten from our midst.

*Gather together the people – the men, the women, and the small children. (31:12)*

Rashi explains that the men came to study; the women came to hear words of Torah; the children came to give reward to those who brought them. Nachlas Tzvi cites Horav Shraga Moshe Kalmenovitz, zl, who derives a significant lesson from the fact that the parents received reward for bringing their infants to the Hakhel gathering. After all, if the parents were obligated to come, who would be taking care of their children? If the Torah demands that the parents attend, it should take into consideration that there is a family at home. For this reason, the Torah provided a special reward for those who brought their young children. The parents obviously had no other alternative but to bring them. Yet, the Torah rewarded them for what they were compelled to do. That is the beauty of the Torah.

Horav Moshe Wolfson, Shlita, offers a number of alternative approaches towards answering the question. His first reason is a practical one. Over a year had passed during which Klal Yisrael had not worked in their fields. It was the eighth year in the Shemita cycle, the first year following the Shemita. The people were about to plow and plant for the next harvest. They needed Hashem's blessing that it would be a successful harvest. They all gathered in Yerushalayim on Succos to pray for water for the coming year. Chazal teach us that the greatest merit for effecting Hashem's blessing of rain is tzedakah and acts of loving kindness. Indeed, when Chazal turned to Abba Chilkiya to pray for rain, both he and his wife prayed. The rain clouds appeared in his wife's side of the room, where she stood in supplication. This occurred because she was at home and, thus, had greater opportunity to help the poor.

When all of Klal Yisrael congregated in Yerushalayim for the festival of Succos and the Hakhel experience, they obviously needed places to stay. The open-hearted attitude of the city's citizens and their warm welcome to the guests made this experience very amenable. The added guests placed the primary burden upon the women who provided the care for the visitors. There are two ways to host guests: One can wait until the visitor knocks on the door and then welcome him. This is referred to as hachnosas orchim, welcoming guests to one's home. There is an even higher level of greeting visitors: Seeking guests and then bringing them home. This is called havoas orchim. Hashem Yisborach knew what is required to welcome guests to Yerushalayim. He also distinguished between those that welcomed guests and those that sought them out to bring them home. He wanted to give an extra reward to those who brought the guests to their home, the "mevieiham". He did this by instructing the Jews to bring along their infants, thereby increasing the effort for those special women who brought guests to their homes, thus increasing their reward.

In his last two reasons, Horav Wolfson gives essentially the same response, but as the result of two separate reasons. First, we must keep in mind that the people had to expend limited physical effort during the Shemita year. They were not permitted to work their fields. In an agricultural community, this is the primary occupation. During Shemita, they had an entire year to devote themselves entirely to spiritual pursuits, to study Torah, to pray longer and with more devotion, to give more of themselves to spiritual devotion and reflection. The infants that these people brought for the Hakhel experience were the "products" of the Shemita year, a year during which the parents' spiritual level soared. These special children indeed engendered a great zechus, merit, for Klal Yisrael, their "mevieiham," who brought them into the world. Their presence was as unique as they were.

Last, Horav Wolfson explains that while bitachon, trust in the Almighty, is a necessary component in every material endeavor, it is especially necessary in order to maintain one's spiritual plateau while he is confronting the challenges of the material/physical dimension. One needs bitachon in order to pray with devotion, so that he does not rush through the davening because he might be late for a business deal. It is especially difficult to take time off from one's financial pursuits to study Torah during the workday. Maintaining a high level of integrity also demands bitachon, for one to believe that he will earn what he is destined to earn regardless of the time and effort he expends in pursuing his goal.

The Shemithah year is the ultimate test of one's trust in Hashem. It truly distinguishes between those that have bitachon and those that are lacking in this pivotal attribute. What would the average citizen of the world do when confronted with such a challenge to his faith? He would be frugal and meticulous in everything he spends. He would do everything not to burden his finances in any way. Indeed, having and raising children would be the first area of abstinence! Not so the observant Jew whose trust in the Almighty is unequivocal. He proceeds with life as usual, trusting Hashem to provide for him and his family while he carries out Hashem's mitzvos. The children that he brings into this world during the Shemithah year are living testimony of his unwavering bitachon in the Almighty. Hashem, therefore, instructs him to take these children to Yerushalayim so that he and all those others who brought these children into the world during the year of Shemithah will receive their extra reward that they truly deserve.

*Hashem said to Moshe, "Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will rise up after the gods of the foreigners. (31:16)*

It is incredible, even enigmatic, that the Torah speaks about Klal Yisrael in such a manner. Earlier the Torah said, "And you who cling to Hashem, your G-d, you are all alive today." Now they are being admonished regarding the rebellion they will make after Moshe's passing. It is like predicting that someone who is currently on a high spiritual plane will commit one of the greatest, heinous sins. Does this make sense? Are we to anticipate that the yeshivah student who is studying Torah, uninterrupted, unaffected by the outside world, will become an uncontrolled, unashamed sinner once he leaves the shelter of the yeshivah?

Horav Gershon Liebman, zl, cites the Ramban who says that Hashem assesses a person's potential based upon his actions of the past. In other words, had Klal Yisrael not sinned earlier in their sojourn, they would not have set a precedent by which would be judged in the future. Sforno agrees in this critique, writing that based solely upon their past history, Klal Yisrael's interest in entering Eretz Yisrael was self-gratification. This brings Horav Liebman to posit that sin is more than an act of happenstance. Rather, it is the defining moment in a person's character, as it establishes his tendency toward sinful behavior.

Sin is no longer a potential, but an apparent possibility. Chazal reveal to us that a sin is an indication of a person's essence. Klal Yisrael achieved a remarkable level of kedushah, holiness; yet, the portent for the future was still there. Hashem, therefore, admonished them not to be secure in their present spiritual plateau. They had also sinned. It was a definite strain upon their character and, thus, an area of concern.

This should be a lesson to all of us: We cannot "mach a'vek," disregard, a sinful act as a one-

time occurrence. These acts do not “just happen.” They are the result of an overactive yetzer hora, evil inclination - one that can just as easily lift its ugly head with even more serious consequences. There is no greater ammunition than being forewarned. Regrettably, some of us think we know it all, a “knowledge” that is the precursor of sin.

*I can no longer go out and come in, for Hashem has said to me, "You shall not cross this Yarden."  
(31:1)*

Considering Moshe Rabbeinu's advanced age, one would expect that his inability to execute the demands of his office physically would impede him from fulfilling his leadership role. But Moshe, however, asserted that "Hashem has said to me, You shall not cross this Yarden." According to human nature, one undertakes to perform an endeavor, and "afterwards" he waits to see if Hashem is pleased with his plans. This approach is confirmed by the actions of tzaddikim who are mishtadel, endeavor, to do they can, rather than to wait passively for Divine intervention to solve every problem.

Yaakov Avinu indicated to his wives that he had decided to leave Lavan's "hospitality" in response to the latter's impassiveness to him. Ostensibly, Lavan's original superficial "warmth" was not obvious. It was time to leave, while they were still able to do so. Only afterwards did Yaakov mention that Hashem had instructed him to leave. Apparently Yaakov did not recount his reasons by order of importance, but rather chronologically. Lavan's waning relationship with him happened first, therefore, he mentioned it first.

If Yaakov perceived that Lavan was distancing himself from him, he should have responded by taking Lavan's attitude as a clue that he should leave. While it is always beneficial to receive a vote of confidence from Heaven, it would be foolish to overlook the obvious.

*At the end of each seven years, after the time of the Shemittah year, on the festival of Sukkos...in the place that He shall choose, read this Torah in front of all Yisrael, in their ears (so that they may hear it). Gather the nation... so that they may learn and fear Hashem your G-d. (31:10,11)*

The mitzvah of Hakhel, communal gathering, was required every seven years. The impressiveness of this mitzvah is underscored by the fact that every Jew, regardless of age, rank or position, assembled in the courtyard of the Bais Hamikdash on the second day of Succos, in the first year after the previous Shemittah cycle had concluded, to listen as the Melech Yisrael, Jewish king, read aloud special sections of the Torah. The Shem M'Shmu'el observes two distinctions concerning this mitzvah. First, the king himself reads from the Torah. Second, the gathering is held during the year following Shemittah. It is well known that during the Shemittah year the farmers, who comprised a large component of Klal Yisrael, did not work the land. They now had extra time to designate for studying Torah and to reacquaint themselves with concepts that they might have ignored during the previous six years.

Bearing this in mind, would it not have been more logical for Hakhel to have been executed during the Shemittah year, when the majority of the nation had the time to attend to its message? Also, why did the Torah select the king to read from the Torah?

The Shem M'Shmu'el cites the Rambam in Hilchos Melachim 3:6, that compares the Melech Yisrael to the heart of all Klal Yisrael. The king is the central focus for Klal Yisrael, the seat of their communal needs, like the heart is to the human body. Because the king maintains such a critical position in Klal Yisrael, he is the individual who is to read from the Torah. Hakhel represents a unique moment for all of Klal Yisrael, as they reattach themselves to their source by internalizing the most significant messages of the Torah. It is, therefore, appropriate that the king, symbolizing the heart of Klal Yisrael, infuse these lessons, just as the heart pumps blood throughout the human body.

We now understand why the Hakhel experience occurs during the year after Shemittah. The most significant event will leave a lasting impression only upon one who has been attuned to it. Torah refines a person as it subconsciously influences him. Torah makes him receptive to matters of spiritual ascendancy. Indeed, only after one has studied Torah does its message and observance have lasting meaning. Chazal teach us that if one confronts the yetzer hora, evil inclination, if he is challenged by its blandishments, he should "pull him/it into the Bais Medrash." This means, if one studies Torah, hopefully the yetzer hora will have no effect upon him. If that is not effective, if the pull of the yetzer hora is greater than the pull of the Bais Medrash, "recite Shema," accept upon yourself the yoke of Heaven, attach yourself closer to the Almighty. If that also has no effect and you feel you are losing the battle, "remember the yom ha'missah, day of death". Confront your own mortality and you will realize that deferring to the yetzer hora is futile.

Obviously, the last effort is the most successful. Why, then, should one wait until he has exhausted the first two avenues of attack before he concedes to the third? The answer, comments Horav Zalmen Sorotzkin, zl, is that unless one has first been sensitized through Torah study, confronting his own mortality will have little effect. One must first value the meaning of life before the possibility of losing it will be meaningful.

This powerful statement helps us to appreciate why the Torah requires us to observe the Hakhel ceremony after the Shemittah year has been completed. Klal Yisrael must spend a year engaged in Torah study and introspection before the Hakhel will engender a lasting impression.

Perhaps we can advance this idea further. In order to be inspired by Torah, one must be inclined to listen to its message. He must have a propensity for listening to its message with both ears, applying all of himself to understanding the word of Hashem. The Midrash Tanchuma says regarding the pasuk, "He shall read this Torah...in their ears," that a person who is deaf in one ear is exempt from attending the Hakhel service, since the Torah cannot be read in both ears. Rabbi Tanchuma contends that perfect hearing is essential for the achievement of the goals of the mitzvah of Hakhel. Two ears are necessary. Is that right? Do we not have other mitzvos that require hearing which do not exclude one who is hearing impaired? The blessing one makes prior to the blowing of the Shofar, "Lishmoa Kol Shofar," "to listen to the sound of the Shofar" indicates that a requisite of the mitzvah is to hear the sound of the Shofar. Yet, we do not find an exemption for one who is hearing-impaired. Why is Hakhel different?

Homiletically, we may suggest that the Midrash is teaching us that Torah study demands that one listen with both ears, i.e. have a strong willingness to hear and to learn. Some individuals are ignorant of their Jewish traditions and unaware of their heritage. Yet, they have a burning desire to study, an unquenchable thirst to soak up as much knowledge as they can get. They listen with both ears. They respect the lesson and its teacher.

There are those, however, who due either to their ingrained misconceptions or negative attitude, absolutely refuse to listen to the Torah's message. They continue to resist instruction, regardless of the vehicle of transmission or the experience. They are not hearing-impaired; they are hearing resistant.

The information they process goes in one ear and out the other. Is it any wonder they should not be included in the injunction of Hakhel?

*Hashem said to Moshe, Behold you will lie with your forefathers. (31:16)*

The word "hin'cha" - "behold you will", is a compound expression composed of the word "hein," "behold", and the suffix denoting "you." The Midrash tells us that Moshe was unhappy when Hashem introduced his imminent death using the phrase "Hein karvu yamecha lamus, " "Behold, your days are drawing near." He asked Hashem how He could have decreed his death with the same word that he had used to glorify the Almighty, declaring, "Hein l'Hashem Elokecha Hashamayim u'Shmei ha'Shamayim," "Behold to Hashem your G-d are the Heavens and the highest Heaven" (Devarim,10:14). Hashem responded with the word, "hin'cha" stating that Moshe was assured with his rightful portion in Olam Habah. Hence the word, "hincha," has a positive connotation, suggesting that Hashem will grant great reward to Moshe.

Horav Eli Munk, zl, notes that the word, "hein," is unique by virtue of the fact that it is composed of two consonants, "hay" and "nun," each of which needs another letter like itself in order to be pronounced. In other words, the "hay" needs two "hays," and the "nun" needs two "nuns" in order to be enunciated. Also, the numerical equivalent of "hay" is five. When it is complemented by another "hay" it achieves completion, ten. Similarly, the numerical value of "nun" is fifty, which needs only another "nun" to attain its completion, to achieve a numerical value of one hundred. Moshe chose this unique word, "hein," with which to praise Hashem. He was surprised that Hashem used the exact same word to reply to him concerning a matter of an opposite nature. Hashem explained to him that this world and the World to Come exist in harmony with one another The World to Come is the natural complement of this world, a completion which is symbolized by the repetition of the "hay" and the "nun."

*It will say on that day, "Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?" (31:17)*

The Sfas Emes cites Horav Bunim M'Pechischa, who states that the actual idea that one says or even thinks that "Ein Elokai b'kirbi," "My G-d is not in my midst," constitutes a grave sin which may be the source of his troubles. How does one have "yiush," how does one despair? Every Jew is enjoined to believe whole-heartedly that Hashem is with him at all times, through all circumstances, under all conditions. Hashem does not, and will not ever, forsake us. We need to be able to say the same regarding our relationship with Him.

The Kotzker Rov was once asked, "Where is G-d?" to which he replied, "Where is He not?" This fact was not a question posed in order to avoid a reply, but rather the reply to a question. Hashem is always with us. We are the ones who turn away from Him. It is analogous to a loving father who watches over his child. At no time does the father ignore his charge. At times the child attempts to escape his father's purview.

In the Haftorah for Shabbos Shuvah, the Navi Hoshea proclaims, "Shuvah Yisrael," "Return O Yisrael" - Return to Hashem, return to the source. How much of a "return" is sufficient? "ad Hashem

Elokecha, "Until Hashem your G-d." Is it enough to return unto Hashem? Is it sufficient to simply return in principle, to return with conscience, to return with one's heart? Or does Hashem demand a more substantial demonstration of the intent to return? "Kechu imachem devarim, v'shuvu el Hashem," "Take with you words and return to Hashem." One must take his entire being, not simply his conscience. To be a Jew at heart has regrettably become very popular, but is that really what Hashem requires of us? Horav Moshe Swift, zl, distinguishes between, "ad" and "el" - "ad" is limited. Teshuvah takes one to the front door - but stops there. "El" is unlimited, it signifies a complete return. One should not simply return his consciousness; he must return his entire self, his entire essence. Teshuvah means a total religious comeback, a complete return to total observance, not merely lip service.

*So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Bnei Yisrael, place it into their mouth.  
(31:19)*

The commentaries discuss to which song Moshe was referring. The question is whether Chazal consider the entire Torah to be a song, or whether the reference is to a specific part. Why is the Torah called a song? Simply put, the Torah represents harmony, a unity of perfection in which every phrase, every verse, every mitzvah is perfect. The Torah is not vulnerable to reform or change. Because it is a Divine composition, it is perfect in every sense. Just as a musical score loses its flavor if one makes a single variation in the notes or rhythm, so, too, the Torah collapses, if one removes or changes a single mitzvah. It is no longer the Torah.

Horav Moshe Swift, zl, suggests another idea why the Torah is called a song. The Torah brings music to life, it gives it meaning and harmony, it transforms the most sorrowful event into one of hope and even joy. With Torah one can cope, one can hope, one can begin to understand. Without Torah, who really are we?

Moshe instructs Klal Yisrael to write the song, to study it and teach it to their children, placing it in their mouths. The melody of Torah should always be on their lips; they should sing the Torah, and they should live by it, so that it will bring joy to their lives.