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Boston	6:51	Moscow	6:54
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Houston	7:20	Phoenix	6:29
Jerusalem	6:38	Pittsburgh	7:26
Johannesburg	5:39	Seattle	7:22
Los Angeles	6:54	Sydney	5:23
London	7:17	Tokyo	5:43
Miami	7:17	Toronto	7:26
Montreal	7:04	Washington DC	7:13

Weekly Parsha

Netzavim
Vayelech

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Moshe commanded them, saying, ‘At the end of [every] seven years, at an appointed time, [after] the Shemittah year, on the Festival of Succot, when all Israel comes to appear before Hashem, your

(continued on next page)

ROSH HASHANA

AVERTING THE EVIL DECREE

TESHUVA - TEFILA - TZEDAKA

Another year has passed us by. We are about to stand trial. The Shofar has been blasted after the morning prayers all this month, to awaken us to “search our ways and investigate, and return to God”. The very fact that we need to be woken means that man’s nature is to veer from facing stark reality. Throughout the year, we slip into a semi-conscious mode, where our approach to God – our purpose – becomes obscured by everyday life, and nonsense. Of course the righteous always reflect, “A righteous man who sins in the morning, has certainly repented by evening”. But typical man requires a yearly wake up call. In future times, matters will be different: “all sons of flesh will



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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(Netzavim cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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God, in the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before all Yisrael, in their ears. Assemble the people: the men, the women, and the children, and your convert in your cities, in order that they hear, and in order that they learn and fear Hashem, your God, and they will observe to do all the words of this Torah. And their children, who did not know, will hear and learn to fear Hashem, your God, all the days that you live on the land, to which you are crossing the Jordan, to possess'." (Devarim 31:10-13)

This week's parasha describes the mitzvah of HaKhel. This mitzvah is performed on the Succot following the Shemitah year. The nation gathers at the Bait HaMikdash – the Temple – for the festival. On the day following the first day of the festival, the entire nation gathers in the outer courtyard of the Bait HaMikdash. At this assembly the king reads to the nation major portions of Sefer Devarim.

The above passages stipulate that men, women and children are included in this mitzvah. It is unusual for children to be explicitly included in mitzvot. Presumably, the children to whom the passages refer are minors. As minors they are not obligated to perform the mitzvot. Why are they included in this commandment?

Nachmanides suggests that children to whom the passages refer are not infants. Instead, they are approaching the age of maturity and will soon be obligated to observe the commandments. They are capable of participating fully in this assembly and will benefit from hearing this impressive reading of the Torah. Therefore, it is not unreasonable for these children to be included in this commandment.

However, Nachmanides acknowledges that his interpretation of the passages does not seem to agree with its treatment by the Talmud. The Talmud asks why children are included in the commandment. The Talmud answers that children are included in order to provide a reward to their parents who bring them to Yerushalayim and to the assembly.[1]

The Talmud's response is enigmatic. It requires further consideration. But regardless of the exact meaning of the Talmud's response, it clearly does not correspond with Nachmanides' interpretation of "children." If these

children were close to adulthood, as Nachmanides suggests, the Talmud should have simply responded that they are brought because they are of adequate maturity to benefit from the event. The implication of the Talmud's response is that the children are not brought for their own benefit. They are brought in order to provide benefit – reward – to their parents who bring them. This implies that the children to whom the passage refers are youngsters who are not yet approaching adulthood.[2]

Based on this discussion in the Talmud, most authorities disagree with Nachmanides and maintain that even very young children are included in this mitzvah. As a result of this consensus ruling, Minchat Chinuch explores the minimum age at which children are included in the commandment.[3]

HaKatav VeHaKalah offers a novel explanation of the Talmud's comments. He explains that according to the Talmud, the children to whom the passages refer are specifically those who are very young and unable to fully grasp the event. These young children would inevitably be among the assembly. Their parents converged upon Yerushalayim and the Bait HaMikdash from all parts of the Land of Israel. They could not be expected to leave their children at home with the few individuals who are exempt from this commandment. According to HaKatav



VeHakalah, the Talmud is explaining that although these children would be present in any event – as a consequence of practical considerations – the Torah legislates their inclusion in the assembly. Through legislating their inclusion their presence becomes part of the commandment. As a result, the efforts of their parents to bring them to the assembly are not merely a response to a practical necessity. These efforts become part of the mitzvah. As part of the mitzvah, these efforts are worthy of reward.[4]

Tosefot seem to disagree with this interpretation. Tosefot's exact comments will be explored later.

The comments of Sefer HaChinuch seem to imply a different interpretation of the Talmud's comment. Sefer HaChinuch discusses the objective of the mitzvah of HaKhel. He explains that the Torah is essential to our lives. The HaKhel assembly was an impressive event. The massing of the entire nation to hear

(continued on next page)

the reading by the king of Sefer Devarim created a strong, moving impression upon all those present. It reinforced the importance and centrality of the Torah in our lives.[5]

According to this insight, an alternative interpretation of the Talmud's comments emerges. The young children were not included in order to provide them with instruction. They were too young. However, their presence did impact the character of the assembly as a national event. Their parents who brought them contributed to the uniqueness and immensity of the event. The Talmud is telling us that the parents receive rewards for their efforts to create this special and impressive spectacle.

Maimonides does not speak directly to this issue. However, he does discuss a series of related questions which provides an insight into his position regarding the inclusion of young children.

The king read from Sefer Devarim in Ivrit – Hebrew. Among those required to be present are converts who may not even understand Ivrit. Why are those who cannot even understand the reading required to be present? Maimonides adds that even great scholars who are thoroughly versed and committed to the teachings of the Torah must participate in the assembly. Why must these individuals include themselves? Finally, in an assembly of this size, it is inevitable that a significant portion of those present will not be able to hear the king's reading. What expectation does the Torah have of these individuals? How are they to participate?

Maimonides responds that although all of these groups cannot directly benefit from hearing the king's reading, they are required to attentively focus on the reading. He continues to explain that the objective of this assembly is to strengthen our commitment to the Torah. We are to attend to the reading – even if we cannot hear or understand it – in awe and as if we are reliving the Revelation at Sinai. In other words, serious, attentive participation in the event is an end in itself. The experience of this participation is achieved regardless of whether the participant can fully understand, or even hear, the reading.[6]

It is notable that according to Maimonides, the essential element of the event is not actually hearing the reading and understanding it. The very participation in the event is designed to make a strong emotional impression upon those assembled. From this prospective, it is not necessary for a child to be intellectually mature or approaching adulthood to benefit from the event. The emotional



impact of the event will be felt even by younger children. The message of the Talmud is that parents are required to provide this moving emotional experience for their children.

Let us now consider Tosefot's comments. Tosefot comment that from the mitzvah of HaKhel we learn that it is appropriate to bring young children to synagogue.[7] As noted above, Tosefot apparently do not accept the HaKatav VeHaKabalah's interpretation of the Talmud's comments. Unlike the instance of HaKhel, the children could be left at home. There is not a practical imperative to include young children in the assembly in the synagogue. These comments seem to indicate that even though young children could be left at home, it is preferable to bring them to synagogue.

However, Tosefot's comments are completely understandable from Maimonides' perspective. Although young children may not be capable of intellectually appreciating the beauty of the prayers, they can experience the emotional impact of a community assembling in order to offer prayers to Hashem and hear the reading of His Torah.

When my children were young, they regularly accompanied me to synagogue. One Shabbat morning I walked home with an elder member of our congregation. He asked me if I required my children to stand by my side during services so that I could carefully supervise them. I was cautious in my response. I assumed that this gentleman – like many others – was annoyed by the sometimes noisy and distracting behavior of the young children in our congregation. I explained that I did try to supervise them but that I probably was guilty of lapses. To my surprise, he admonished me to not supervise them too carefully or with too heavy a hand. He commented that synagogue attendance can have a powerful impact on children. But for this impact to occur, the children must feel a sense of joy and excitement at the synagogue. He said, "Let them run up to the bimah or the aron. Don't be overly restrictive." Once I recovered from the shock of this exchange, I realized that this was an important insight.

It seems that this wise gentleman's advice is reflected in Tosefot's comments. Tosefot contend that we are encouraged to bring our young children to synagogue in order to share with them the experience of synagogue attendance. Of course, our children will not appreciate or experience the services in the same way as their parents. But nonetheless, we must endeavor to provide them with the emotional impact of the experience of participating in an assembly devoted to prayer and Torah. ■

[1] Mesechet Chagigah 3a.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 31:13.

[3] Rav Yosef Babad, Minchat Chinuch, Mitzvah 612, note 4.

[4] Commentary HaKatav VeHaKabalah on Sefer Devarim 31:12

[5] Rav Aharon HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 612.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Chagigah 3:6.

[7] Tosefot, Mesechet Chagigah 3a.

(Rosh Hashana continued from page 1)

Rosh Hashana

call Your name". But for now, we are distracted; our values are severely diluted from the media, and centuries of alien influences.

Part of that influence has resulted in our superstitious beliefs. Although never witnessed or documented throughout time, the world, and many Jews feel there are forces that exist outside of God, nature, human strength and technology. Such beliefs offer the imagined security craved by the infantile mind. But such beliefs are just that: beliefs, with no proof in reality. Red Bendels; opening the Ark to help one's pregnant wife have an easier "opening" for her pregnancy; chamzas and other amulets; and checking mezuzas. We addressed these all year. But when we glance at the Rosh Hashana prayers, we read this: "Teshuva, Prayer and Tzedaka avert the evil decree". This means that our perfection alone is what averts God's evil for us. This makes sense: if we change our ways, God no longer needs to help us change through His punishments. But if we don't repent, amulets and other foolish practices will not stand against God's will. And according to God's just system of Reward and Punishment, we must receive punishments.

During Rosh Hashana we will be reciting true ideas regarding God's role as King, His knowledge of every man and woman; our actions and our thoughts, and we will blow the ram's horn – the shofar – as a display of our agreement that Abraham and Isaac's sacrifice, substituted with the ram, were admirable acts. We use this example, as this event embodies better than any other, that man can truly reach a love of God...a love that surpasses the love of our own children. We reflect on God's kingship, as this is the most primary truth, and truth is our objective as rational beings. We reflect on God's omniscience – His all-knowing nature – to help us realize that He is aware of our every action and thought. Hopefully this moves man to repent, and addresses his other half, his values. And we express our convictions in both God's kingship and omniscience with the shofar blasts.

These three themes comprise all of the prayers on this holiday. Nowhere in our prayers do we make mention of any other means of perfecting ourselves, and earning God's attention and providence. The formula is simple, and is also unanimous among the greatest Rabbis and Sages: Teshuva, Prayer and Tzedaka avert the decree. Teshuva refers to the inner change of our corrupt ideas, personality traits and actions. It means asking others to forgive us. It means we must raise our level of knowledge to mirror God's Torah values, realizing their eternal and absolute truths, and then adopting these values. It means



regret on the past, and a commitment on the future. Prayer means we seek to draw close to He who created us. Prayer is an activity where we contemplate precisely formulated truths; evaluating ourselves, and asking God for that which leads us to the life our Creator informed us will be most beneficial. Tzedaka refers to recognition of all mankind as our equals: others deserve our time, money, and attention. They too deserve to be happy. Our money is not ours alone, but should be used as the Creator of wealth demands. Tzedaka tempers a proper relationship to wealth, and underlines one of its great purposes.

Perfecting our values and ideas; seeking to realign with God and His outline for human life; and humbly treating all others as equals, is the perfected life, and the life God sustains year to year. Perfection is not the blind faith in amulets and useless objects and practices that offer no proof, nor have ever worked. Had we taken the time to address the first perfection – the perfection of our truths – we would have studied more this year, discovering that amulets never once stopped a speeding car heading at an unsuspecting victim. Nor has a red thread closed a bleeding artery in an ailing patient. Checking mezuzas never once extinguished flames in a home. Nor have these practices been cited in our Rosh Hashana prayers as the correct path to God.

Intelligence is what God gave us, and no other creation. Intelligence teaches us that these practices never worked, and never will. Intelligence demands that all we think, feel and do, must be based on proof, on reason, and not blind faith or unconfirmed beliefs.

Moses our teacher, and the teacher of all Jews and Gentiles should be followed over any other Rabbi, and certainly any other human being. He was the wisest man and the greatest prophet. His

words are absolute truths, and why they form the fifth of the Five Books, the book of Deuteronomy. And Moses never told a single person to follow the foolish practices cited above and so common today in Jewish homes, temples, shuls, schools and yeshivas.

If you truly wish to be judged for good, for life, health, success and tranquility this year, you must realize that this God that is judging and sentencing you, is also the same God who created an Earthly reality that follows laws and principles. God gave us intelligence to understand these principles, to follow them alone, and to abandon everything else. If we do, we gain a good judgment, since we will be following God's will, dictated by His Torah and the earthly reality begging our attention and adherence. If however we continue to follow baseless beliefs that violate Moses' and God's words, we have no defense when the punishment comes.

So contemplate all that you read this Rosh Hashana. Understand why it is only through Teshuva, Prayer and Tzedaka that we obtain a good decree. And as you do Teshuva, reflect on all your beliefs: "Are they based on Torah, or merely duplications of other Jew's unexamined acts? Have I been diligent in Tzedaka? Have I wronged anyone? Have I sought forgiveness? Is my ego too proud? Do I drive without respect for others? Have I cheated in business? Have I spoken poorly of another? Am I out for myself first? Can I be more patient with others? Do I think about how I can help someone...even before they ask?"

"Do I live with an optimum concern for honesty and fairness?"

We will continue this theme next week with our Rosh Hashanah issue on Wednesday. Until then, Shabbat Shalom. ■



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MID-AUGUST FOR 8 MONTHS.
WE ASK YOU TO HAVE HIM IN YOUR TEFILOS
FOR A SAFE MISSION AND RETURN.

**American to save Israeli Solider:
How you can partake in this Mitzvah**



This summer a 19 year-old Israeli Solider will get a new lease on life due to a selfless gift from Yosef Chiger, of Harrisburg Pennsylvania. Ayelet Katz, of Moshav Be'er Tuvia had been stationed in Tel Nof Air Force Base, where she worked as an assistant to the head of human resources, until she was forced to leave the IDF because of kidney failure and begin fulltime dialysis. Often Israelis in need of kidney transplants wait for years because of the shortage of organs; however with the help of the Halachic Organ Donor Society (HODS) Ayelet will be fortunate to receive an altruistic donation that will allow her to resume a healthy life in a matter of months. Chiger, married and the father of a five-year old daughter, will be traveling to Israel to donate his kidney and thereby giving Ayelet the ability to resume a full and healthy life. It was especially significant to Chiger that she is an Israeli and a solider, and that the transplant means that she will have a long productive life ahead of her.

The transplant is being facilitated by the Halachic Organ Donor Society, which facilitates altruistic kidney donations and educates Jews about organ donation and halacha.

HODS is raising \$15,000 to bring Chiger and his family to Israel. Contributions can sent to the HOD Society at 49 West 45th Street, 10th Floor, New York, NY or via their website at www.hods.org.