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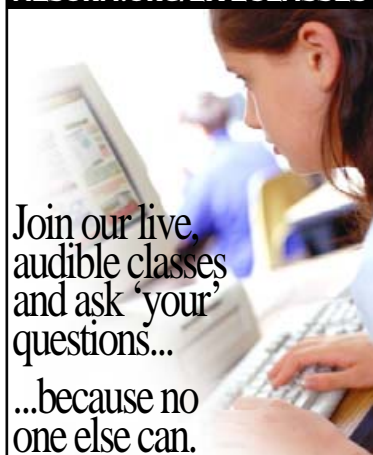
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Weekly Parsha

Nitzavim

RABBI BERNARD FOX

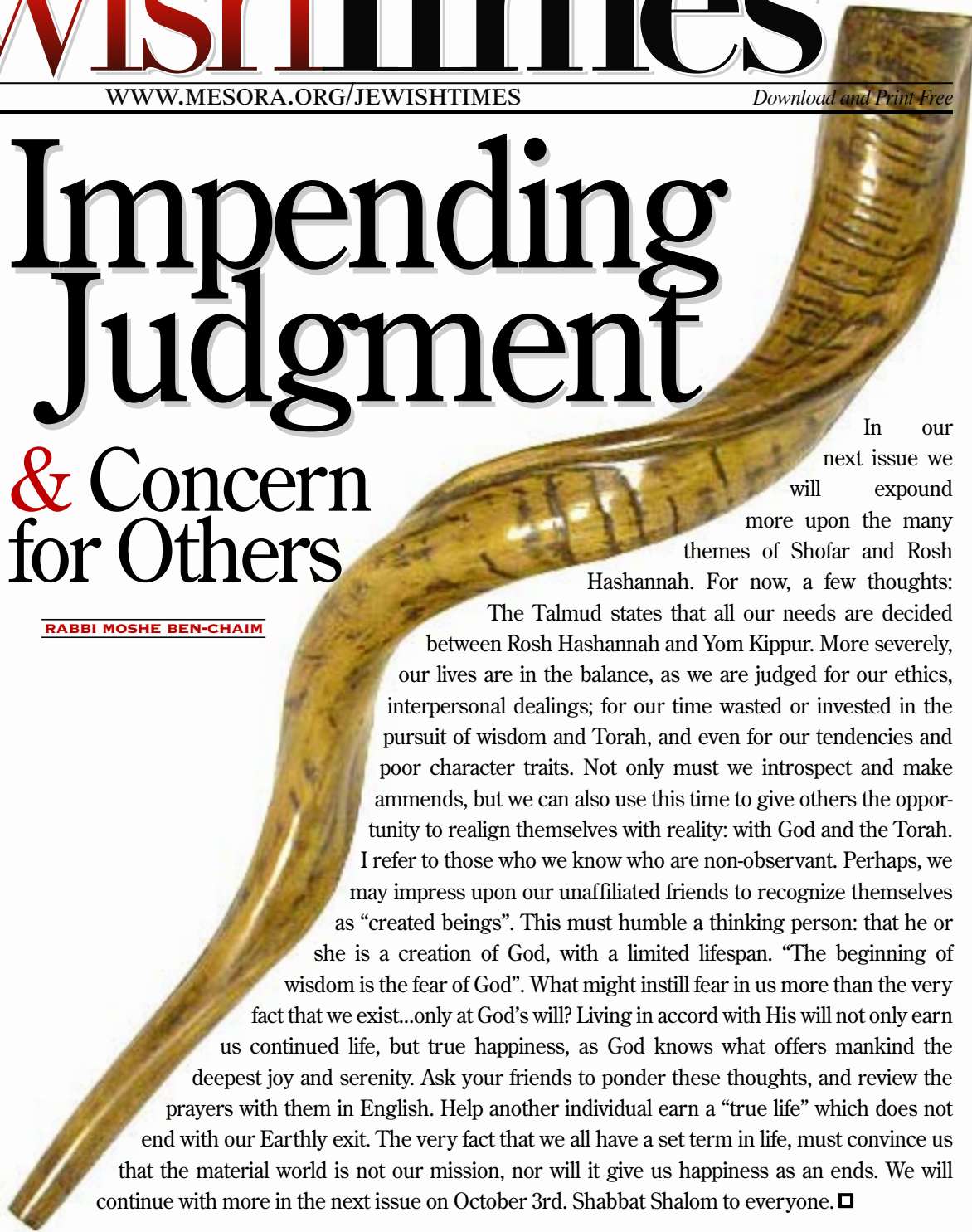
"The hidden things are the concern of Hashem your G-d. Regarding the revealed things, it is ours and our children's responsibility forever to observe the words of this Torah." (Devarim 29:28)

The meaning of the above pasuk is not very clear. It tells us that those things that are hidden are the responsi-

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Impending Judgment & Concern for Others

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



In our next issue we will expound more upon the many themes of Shofar and Rosh

Hashannah. For now, a few thoughts:

The Talmud states that all our needs are decided between Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur. More severely, our lives are in the balance, as we are judged for our ethics, interpersonal dealings; for our time wasted or invested in the pursuit of wisdom and Torah, and even for our tendencies and poor character traits. Not only must we introspect and make ammends, but we can also use this time to give others the opportunity to realign themselves with reality: with God and the Torah. I refer to those who we know who are non-observant. Perhaps, we may impress upon our unaffiliated friends to recognize themselves as "created beings". This must humble a thinking person: that he or she is a creation of God, with a limited lifespan. "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God". What might instill fear in us more than the very fact that we exist...only at God's will? Living in accord with His will not only earn us continued life, but true happiness, as God knows what offers mankind the deepest joy and serenity. Ask your friends to ponder these thoughts, and review the prayers with them in English. Help another individual earn a "true life" which does not end with our Earthly exit. The very fact that we all have a set term in life, must convince us that the material world is not our mission, nor will it give us happiness as an ends. We will continue with more in the next issue on October 3rd. Shabbat Shalom to everyone. □

(Nitzavim cont. from page 1)

Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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bility of Hashem but that we and our children are responsible for those things that are revealed. However, what are the things – revealed or hidden – to which the pasuk refers? Rashi explains that the pasuk can only be understood if it is analyzed within its context.

“Perhaps there is among you a man or a woman, or a family or Shevet, whose heart turns away today from being with Hashem our G-d, to go and serve the gods of those nations. Perhaps there is among you a root flourishing with gall and wormwood. And it will be that when he hears the words of this curse, he will bless himself in his heart saying, “Peace will be with me, though I walk as my heart sees fit.” – thereby adding the watered upon the thirsty.” (Devarim 29:17-18)

This is a difficult pasuk to completely understand but its basic meaning is clear. Moshe has described to Bnai Yisrael the blessing that will be bestowed upon them if they are faithful to the Torah and the curses that will befall them if they abandon the Torah. In the above pasuk, Moshe describes a possible reaction to his admonition to observe the Torah. It is possible that some person, family or Shevet will not take his warning seriously. This person or group will imagine that it is possible to do as one pleases and yet avoid the punishments that Moshe has described. Moshe continues and explains that this person or group makes a serious mistake in believing that our actions have no consequences.

“The later generation will say – your children that arise after you and the foreigner who will come from a distant land – when they will see the plagues of the land and its illnesses which Hashem has afflicted upon it.” (Devarim 29:21)

Moshe explains that if we abandon the Torah and imagine that there are no consequences for our actions that land of Israel and its people will be struck with terrible plagues. The suffering that we will experience will be so terrible that it will evoke a response of awe and wonderment among those who observe the absolute destruction.

Rashi explains that this is the context of the first pasuk. Moshe warns the individual or group against imagining that our actions do not have consequences. He asserts that if we are unfaithful to the Torah and imagine that Hashem will not take notice, we will experience severe and terrible punishments. However, it must be noted that Moshe indicates that the land and its entire people will be punished for the sins of even an individual, family or single Shevet. In other words, we have a shared responsibility for the observance of every person, family and Shevet. The entire nation will be punished for the sins of even a single person. Moshe's assertion of collective responsibility invites a powerful objection. How can we be responsible for the sins of every individual?

Moshe responds to this objection in the first pasuk. We are not responsible for the hidden sins. Sins that take place in an individual's heart are Hashem's to judge and punish. However, those sins that are open and revealed to us do require our response. In other words, the hidden and revealed “things” in the first pasuk are sins that are hidden or revealed. The basic message of our pasuk is that we do have a collective responsibility for all members of Bnai Yisrael. However, this responsibility has its limits. It extends to observable sins. To these we can and must respond. However, we are not required to monitor or respond to inappropriate thoughts. This is Hashem's domain and He will judge and deal with these inappropriate attitudes.[1]

Rashi explains that the above pasuk contains a second qualification of our collective responsibility. In the Torah, there is a series of dots above the letters in the pasuk. These dots are used in various places in the Torah. They indicate that the words above which they appear must be qualified. In our case, this means that even our collective responsibility for revealed and observable sins is not absolute. It is limited in some way. What is the limitation?

Rashi explains that our collective responsibility did not emerge until the nation crossed the Jordan and entered the land of Israel. Once the nation entered the land, the blessings bestowed for observance of the Torah and the curses that befall us for its abandonment were to be repeated. The people would acknowledge the blessings and curses. With the acknowledgement of these blessings and curses, collective responsibility will emerge.[2]

Why does the collective responsibility not emerge until the nation enters the land of Israel and accepts the blessings and curses? There seems to be two factors that combine to explain this delay. First, the blessings and curses predominantly relate to the welfare of Bnai Yisrael in the land of Israel. If we are faithful to Hashem and His Torah, we will enjoy the bounty of the land. If we abandon the Torah, we will be deprived of the bounty and eventually we will be exiled from the land. For this reason, when the nation entered that land and began the process of possessing it, they were required to acknowledge the blessings and curses. This acknowledgement expressed an affirmation of the relationship between the nation and the land of Israel. The land of Israel is a blessing bestowed upon the faithful. But the land can also be a curse for those who are unfaithful.

Second, our collective responsibility cannot be separated from the blessings and curses. These are not two separate phenomena. Our collective responsibility is not merely a moral abstraction. It is intrinsically related to our fate. We are a single nation and people. Our identity as a single nation and people is the basis of our collective responsibility. We are judged as a nation and people. If we neglect our collective responsibility, we will be judged and punished collectively.

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“They will stumble one over his brother as in flight from the sword. But there is no pursuer. You will not have the power to withstand your enemy.” (VaYikra 26:37)

There is a second passage in the Torah that expresses the concept of collective responsibility. This passage is found in Sefer VaYikra. The context of this second passage is similar to the context of the passage in our parasha. The Torah describes the blessings and punishments that Moshe has reiterated. In the description of the curses, the Torah tells us that we will be so fearful that we will flee without even being pursued. In our flight, one man will stumble over his brother. Rashi – based on a discussion in the Talmud – explains that the image of one man stumbling over his brother is intended to communicate a message. One man will stumble on the sins of his brother. In other words, we are collectively responsible for one another. When my brother sins, I am responsible. Not only will he fall – be punished – but I will stumble – be punished – as well.[3]

The commentaries are bothered by this interpretation of the pasuk. Where is the allusion to the concept of collective responsibility to be found in the pasuk? Gur Aryeh suggests an important response. He explains that the wording of the passage is unusual. The pasuk describes a man stumbling over his brother. The use of the term “brother” in this context is odd. It would have been more appropriate for the passage to have said, “they will stumble one over another.” Why is the term brother used? Gur Aryeh explains that the term “brother” is used to allude to the nature of the stumbling that the pasuk is describing. The pasuk is describing a person stumbling because of or on account of the actions of his brother. How do we stumble on account of the actions of a brother? We neglect our responsibility for the actions of our brother. Therefore, the pasuk clearly implies collective responsibility.[4]

These two sources for collective responsibility have similar contexts. Both sources occur in the context of a discussion of punishments for abandonment of the Torah. However, there is subtle but important difference between the two sources. According to Gur Aryeh, the second reference indicates that our collective responsibility stems from the fact that all members of Bnai Yisrael are brothers. We are responsible for each other because of our brotherhood. Each of us is responsible for the spiritual and religious development of our brother. We must relate to each other with kindness and compassion. Our compassion for our brother demands that we accept responsibility not only for his material wellbeing but also for his spiritual development.

This is very different from the message in our parasha. Our parasha describes our collective responsibility as an aspect of our commitment to Hashem and the Torah. We are not only responsible to be personally faithful. We are responsible for the

observance and commitment of Bnai Yisrael. Rashi stresses this point in his comments on the pasuk in our parasha. He explains that our collective responsibility stems from the duty to remove evil from among us.[5]

These two messages are not contradictory. Instead, they express two factors that serve as the basis for our collective responsibility. Our parasha, tells us that we are responsible to be faithful to Hashem. This requires that we not only personally observe the Torah but that we also accept responsibility for communal observance. The passage in Sefer VaYikra indicates that there is an additional and complementary basis for our collective responsibility. All members of Bnai Yisrael are brothers. We must have compassion and love for one another. This compassion and love means that we must work for the spiritual advancement of every Jew.

How does our collective responsibility express itself in halacha? The most obvious expression is discussed by the Talmud in Tractate Sanhedrin.[6] The Talmud explains that we are obligated to respond to evil. It seems from the discussion in the Talmud that our obligation is to react. When we observe wickedness, we cannot be passive. We are obligated to respond. However, the Talmud explains in Tractate Rosh HaShanna, that the concept of collective responsibility is the foundation of another halacha.

We are obligated to make a blessing before the performance of most mitzvot. In order for a person to recite a blessing prior to the performance of a mitzvah, the person must be obligated in the performance. However, there is an exception to this rule. If a person has performed a mitzvah and executed his obligation, he is permitted to recite the blessing on behalf of some other person who has not yet performed the commandment. In other words, even though the first person has performed his obligation and is not longer obligated in the mitzvah, he may recite the blessing on someone else’s behalf.

Why does halacha make this exception? Why in this case is a person who has already performed his obligation permitted to recite the blessing? The Talmud explains that this is because of our collective responsibility. By reciting the blessing for this other person, one is assuring that the person performs the mitzvah properly. Our collective responsibility demands that one provide this assistance.[7]

It seems that these two expressions in halacha of collective responsibility reflect the two different themes found in the two sources. The theme of the passage in our parasha is that we must accept joint responsibility for the observance of the Torah. As Rashi explains, this means that we are obligated to remove evil from our midst. This is essentially a reactive obligation. This pasuk seems to correspond with the obligation discussed in Tractate Sanhedrin to respond to evil. Once evil exists, we must respond and bring it to a stop. However, it does not seem that according to Rashi, this passage requires that we

become proactive – that we assist a fellow Jew in the proper performance of a commandment. In other words, this passage does not seem to serve as a basis for the halacha discussed in Tractate Rosh HaShanna – that a person who has performed a commandment may nonetheless recite the blessing for someone else.

The theme of the passage in Sefer VaYikra is that we are brothers. Our compassion for our brothers must extend to tending to their spiritual needs. This theme does seem to obligate us in proactive behaviors. This pasuk does correspond with the halacha in Tractate Rosh HaShanna. Because of our brotherhood, we are responsible to help each other develop spiritually. We are obligated to assist each other in the performance of mitzvot. Therefore, a person who has performed a commandment is permitted to make the blessing on behalf of another person. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 29:28.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 29:28.

[3] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 26:37.

[4] Rav Yehuda Loew of Prague (Maharal), Gur Aryeh Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 26:37.

[5] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 29:28.

[6] Tractate Sanhedrin 43b – 44a.

[7] Tractate Rosh HaShana 29a.

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