

*Prayer makes sense
only if we comprehend
the ideas*



*Use our "Questions" to
study shofar and the
holiday's 3 blessings*

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13
YEARS

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Weekly Parsha

Ki Tavo

RABBI BERNIE FOX

Deviation in Observance to the Right or Left

*Do not deviate from the things
that I have commanded you today
to the right or left – in order to*

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Rosh Hashanna Questions on the Mitzvos

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

This weekend, in preparation for Rosh Hashanna, I ask you to offer your answers to a number of questions intriguing me. Let these questions inspire your Shabbos and weekly study. Please feel free to respond to me with your insights.

1) To start, what is the central idea behind the command of hearing shofar?

From where does shofar derive its central distinction? Was it from Abraham's sacrifice of the ram instead of Isaac; the ram caught by its horns – its "shofar"? Was it the shofar blast heard at Sinai, at God's giving of the Ten Commandments? Or was it from Sisra's mother who wept over his death? Whichever shofar it was, what is its connection to Rosh Hashanna that we must duplicate and hear this sound?

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are we innately

GOOD?

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's parsha Ki Tavo contains a most fascinating mitzvah, that of Viddy Maaser. The term viddy means confession, which is generally associated with admission of sin. Thus, when a person "does Teshuva" and repents of his sins he is obligated to verbally declare his transgressions. Viddy Maaser is the exact opposite of Viddy Teshuva. It takes place in the third year of the Shmitta cycle. After he has fulfilled all of tithing obligations he makes a short declaration affirming that he has meticulously observed all the rules pertaining to the fulfillment of his responsibilities. His statement concludes with a prayer that Hashem will "look down" from His Heavenly

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Weekly Parsha

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follow other gods. (Devarim 28:14)

Moshe admonishes Bnai Yisrael to be faithful to the Torah. The people should not deviate from the commandments of Hashem. They should not worship other gods.

This pasuk contains a subtle difficulty. Moshe begins by warning Bnai Yisrael against deviating from the commandments. He tells the people they should not stray from the path of the Torah to the right or left. This expression seems to refer to even minor deviations. In other words, the Torah is to be strictly and closely observed and even a slight divergence from the Torah path – to the right or left – is to be avoided. Moshe then admonishes the nation against worshipping other gods. In the context of the passage, this admonishment seems to be intended as an example of a deviation – slightly to the right or left – from the path of the Torah. If this was Moshe's intention – to provide an example of slight deviation, then this is not a valid example! Moshe began by stating that the people must guard themselves against minor deviations. Idolatry is not a minor divergence from the path of Torah. Idolatry represents a complete rejection of the fundamentals of the Torah!

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno offers an amazing interpretation of the passage that resolves the question. He begins by interpreting the opening statement in the pasuk. In order to understand his interpretation a brief introduction is required. The Torah is a law revealed by Hashem. It is not a set of traditions. We do not observe the Torah because it was our ancestors' way of life. We are not faithful to the Torah because it is our cultural identity. We must observe the Torah because it is Hashem's revealed truth. This distinction has practical implications. A cultural tradition or identity naturally evolves over time. In fact,

this evolution is healthy and indicative of vibrancy and relevance. For example, as Americans we are proud of our tradition of democracy. However, if our concept of democracy had not evolved and developed since the establishment of the United States, women would not have achieved suffrage and slaves would not have been emancipated. We have extended and developed the concept of democracy beyond the vision of many of our country's founding fathers. This is not a rejection of our traditions; this is a healthy adaptation and development of our traditions.

In contrast, a divinely revealed truth does not require updating. The passage of time requires that the revealed law be analyzed and properly applied to emerging circumstances and challenges. However, Hashem's law does not change and does not require revision.



Nonetheless, we find that over time variations of observance develop within the Jewish community. With the passage of time, these inaccuracies or errors become established elements of a community's pattern of observance. In such instances a clear divergence develops between conventional practice and the actual requirements of halachah. According to Sforno,

the opening portion of the passage refers to these divergences from the path of the Torah—from halachah. Conventional observance must be consistent with the law and an element of observance that is inconsistent with halachah is a divergence from this path to the right or left.

Now, Sforno reconciles the closing portion of the passage with the opening portion. Moshe admonishes the people not to follow other gods. These "other gods" are not idols or heathen deities. These "other gods" are ancestors or respected leaders who inadvertently

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(Ki Tavo continued from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

tently established erroneous customs or observances. We do not follow these traditions out of respect to these leaders. Instead, we must remain faithful to the Torah. Our first loyalty is not to our respected ancestors but to the Torah.[1]

This explanation resolves the difficulty in the pasuk. The entire passage deals with minor deviations from the path of halachah. Moshe begins by admonishing the people against these divergences. He then explains that these deviations can be caused by an irresponsible adoption of observances that have become prevalent and conventional. This attitude is motivated by an inappropriately uncritical relationship toward our ancestors. We must guard ourselves against this attitude and concentrate on fulfilling the will of Hashem.

Foreign Participation in the Rebuilding of Yerushalayim

And foreigners will build your walls, and their kings will minister to you. For although in My anger I struck you, in My favor I have

had mercy upon you. (Yishayahu 60:10, Haftorah for Parshat Ki Tavo)

In the haftorah for our parasha, the Navi discusses the redemption of Bnai Yisrael. He reveals that nations that may have previously persecuted Bnai Yisrael will acknowledge this redemption. The walls of Yerushalayim will be rebuilt. These nations will participate in this project.

This pasuk seems inconsistent with Torah law. Maimonides explains that it is prohibited to accept donations from non-Jews for the building of Yerushalayim's walls. Yerushalayim must be completely identified with Bnai Yisrael. Accepting contributions from other nations for the building and maintenance of the city's walls compromises this identity.[2] If these contributions are not accepted, it follows that direct participation is also prohibited. Yet, our passage states that foreign nations will directly participate in the rebuilding of Yerushalayim's walls! How can we reconcile this passage with halachah?

It is notable that Maimonides seems to contradict himself on the issue of non-Jewish participation in the building of Yerushalayim. As we have shown above, Maimonides maintains that non-Jewish participation is prohibited. However, in another instance, Maimonides takes the opposite position. Maimonides, explains that every war must be preceded by an offer of peace. This even applies to the war waged to conquer the Land of Israel. Prior to waging war with the nations that occupied the Land of Israel, we were required to offer a peaceful settlement. The Torah specifies some of the elements of this settlement. One of the elements is that the nations must accept political suzerainty of Bnai Yisrael. The nation must pay tribute. This tribute includes monetary payment and providing labor for national projects. Maimonides explains that among these projects is maintenance of the walls.[3] He is apparently referring to the walls of Yerushalayim! How can we reconcile this law with the prohibitions against non-

Jewish participation in the building of Yerushalayim's walls?

Rav Meshulam David Soloveitchik offers a solution to our problem. He observes that the prohibition against non-Jewish participation in the building of the walls of Yerushalayim has a purpose. The city must be completely identified with Bnai Yisrael. Non-Jewish participation compromises this identity. Through participating in the building of the walls other nations would become participants in the city's building or maintenance. Their identity would become related to the city. Rav Soloveitchik explains that this consideration does not restrict every form of non-Jewish participation in the city's building and maintenance. Specifically, it allows for participation rendered as tribute to Bnai Yisrael. In such a circumstance, the nation does not contribute as an independent nation. The nation participates as an act of recognition of Bnai Yisrael's suzerainty. No foreign identity becomes attached to the city. The city retains its exclusive association with Bnai Yisrael.[4]

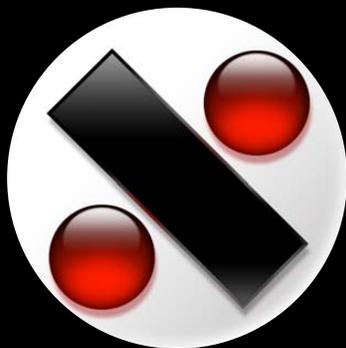
Based upon this distinction, our problem is solved. Maimonides does not contradict himself. He explains that as a general rule foreign participation in the building and maintenance of Yerushalayim's walls is prohibited. However, he explains that participation offered as tribute does not violate this prohibition. This is because participation is only prohibited when it compromises the city's identity. Participation provided as tribute does not compromise this identity. The Navi's prophecy is also consistent with the law. Apparently, the Navi is prophesizing that former enemies will be vanquished. As vanquished nations, these foreign peoples will offer tribute to Bnai Yisrael. Part of this tribute will be their participation in the rebuilding of the city they had destroyed. This tribute does not compromise the identity of the city. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Devarim 28:14.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Matanot Aniyyin 8:8.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim 6:31.

[4] Rav Shimon Yosef Miller, Shai LaTorah (Jerusalem 5755), volume 3, pp. 318 - 319.



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3) We must study the blessings prior to attending services, if we are to truly gain from this holiday. What can we derive from the blessings themselves? Why these three, Malchyos, Zichronos and Shofaros?

The first blessing concludes with the words “Blessed are You, God; King of the entire Earth, Who blesses Israel and the of day of remembrance.”

The second concludes with the words “Blessed are You, God; who remembers the treaty.”

The third concludes with the words “Blessed are You, God; who hears the sound of the shofar of your people Israel with mercy.” (The concluding blessings underscore the central focus of each prayer)

We must learn why the first and second blessings focus on God’s “remembrance”...and remembrance of “what” exactly? And we are also curious as to the distinction between the first and second blessings, as they both refer to remembrance...is the second blessing redundant? We then wonder what is so vital about God hearing Israel’s shofar blasts.

What is Rosh Hashanna all about, and what is the role of shofar? What are the primary messages of each of the three blessings? To fulfill this great holiday as God deems fit, we must understand the ideas behind these central performances. I am sure your discussions will prove fruitful, and I look forward to your thoughts. ■

2) What is the primary significance of this day of Rosh Hashanna? The Talmud[1] states that we must accept God’s kingship as referenced through the first Rosh Hashanna blessing of “Malchiyos” (kingship). We must then cite God’s remembrances, Zichronos, so that we might be remembered before Him for good. And we are told we achieve this via the Shofaros blessing, citing Torah passages referring to shofar. But if we already recalled God’s kingship and His remembrance through the verbalization of each ‘blessing’, what greater purpose is achieved through the additional shofar blasts during those blessings? This is compounded by the Talmud’s[2] words that if we lack either the blessings or the blasts, a lack of blasts nullifies the blessings and a lack of the blessings nullifies the blasts. So what is this combination of prayers and shofar blasts, where both are crucial to the fulfillment of our Rosh Hashanna obligations?

[1] Rosh Hashanna 16a, 34b

[2] Rosh Hashanna 34b

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(Innately Good? continued from page 1)

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abode and bless His Nation Israel and the land that He gave them, just as He promised, a land which flows "milk and honey." The question arises: what is the purpose of this declaration and why is it referred to as confession, when he has committed no crime and in fact has favorably discharged all of his responsibilities?

review what he did and to specify that he did not act out of any innate benevolence but only because he adhered to the halachic system which was given to us by Hashem. In recounting his actions he will become aware of all of his resistances, which had to be overcome in order to comply with the requirements of the mitzvah. He will not fall prey to the illusion that he is a naturally generous person who just wants to help people. Rather, he will realize that man is essentially selfish but can transform himself only through observance of the Torah, which provides the knowledge and deeds man must perform to reach a higher level. Vidduy Maaser is a declaration of the manner in which a person has changed as a result of his adherence to Torah and mitzvot. When a person achieves the awareness that all the good that he does stems from his adherence to Torah he has a right to request that Hashem continue to provide him with all the blessings that enable him to perform acts of righteousness and generosity. Shabbat Shalom. ■

In my opinion we must expand the Torah's concept of vidduy. It is not limited to recognition of guilt but refers to a more general kind of introspection. We should have an accurate and insightful awareness of our inner nature. We should not be content with a superficial understanding of our psychological makeup. We should examine and evaluate our behavior not only when we transgress but when we do mitzvah as well. There is a tendency to pat oneself on the back and feel very good when we have displayed generosity and tithed our crops. This can lead to a false sense of pride and an overestimation of one's innate "goodness". It is important for a person to

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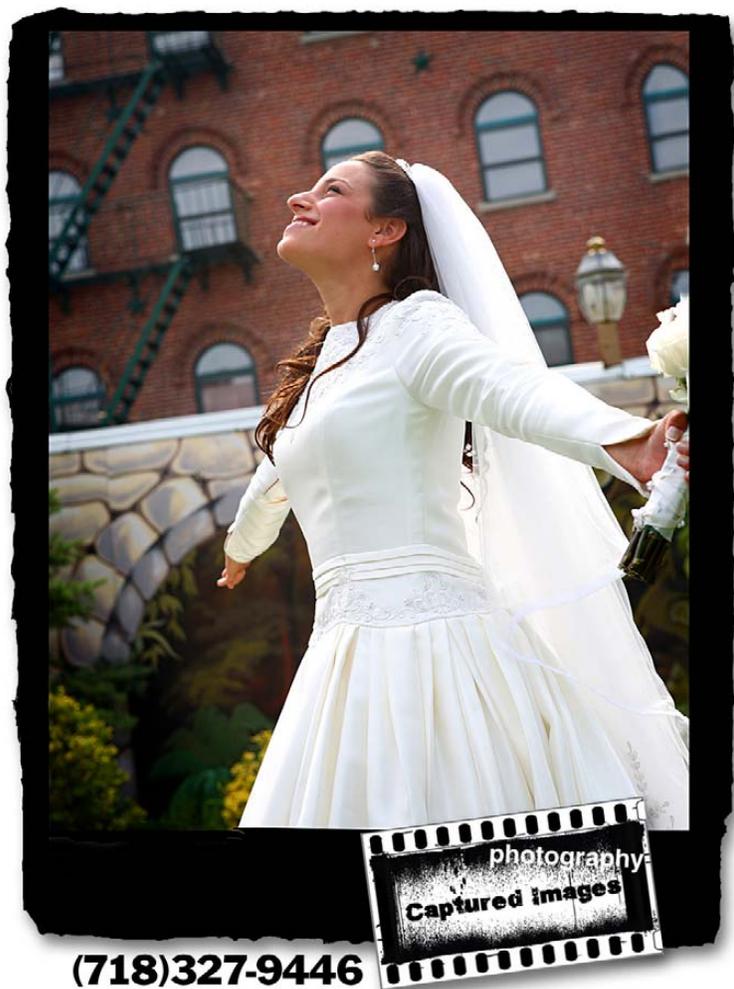
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