

**LIGHT  
FROM  
THE  
FUTURE  
PARSHAS HA'AZINU  
SHABBOS SHUVAH**

**BY  
HESCHEL GREENBERG**

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE - PARSHAS HA'AZINU-SHABBOS  
SHUVAH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE  
ESSAYS ON PARSHAS HA'AZINU-SHABBOS  
SHUVAH

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**LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE - PARSHAS HA'AZINU-SHABBOS  
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**Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who, more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption**

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## INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Ha'azinu-Shabbos Shuvah* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 23 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

“The time of your Redemption has arrived.”

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning about Moshiach and Redemption has the capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

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In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *Galus/exile* mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

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# ESSAY ONE

## THE LAST COMMANDMENT

We are situated between the last moments of Galus-exile  
and the beginning of the Final Redemption.

Because we are the “bridge” generation, we may experience  
conflicting and often diametrically opposing emotions.

We can view the unfolding of events through the shaded  
glasses of Galus which make everything seem dark and  
dreary.

Or we can see the dawning rays of the future’s period of  
light on the horizon.

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# ESSAY ONE

## THE LAST COMMANDMENT

### Loss of the Land

The very last of the 613 commandments in the Torah is alluded to in this week's parsha, which the Talmud states is the Biblical source for the commandment to bless G-d before studying Torah.

"When I call out the name of G-d; ascribe greatness to our G-d."

Rashi explains that these words were spoken by Moses to introduce the Song of Ha'azinu. Since he would be imparting words of Torah, Moses therefore stated: "I will call out the name of G-d," meaning that he will first recite a blessing, which the Jewish people were expected to affirm by saying Amen.

The fact that it is the last commandment of the Torah underscores its importance as recognized by the Talmudic principle that the end encapsulates all of that which preceded it.

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Our Sages highlight the importance of this Mitzvah in an even more dramatic way:

The Talmud (Nedarim 81a) discusses how the Sages and the prophets were mystified as to the cause of the loss of the Land at the end of the First Temple Era, until G-d revealed the reason: "It is because they had forsaken my Torah that I have placed before them." (Jeremiah 9:12)" Says Rabbi Yehudah, in the name of Rav: "[It means] they did not recite the blessing on the Torah first."

Commentators explain that their failure to recite the blessing before learning Torah signaled that although they studied Torah they did not cherish it.

On a deeper level, their reluctance to recite the blessing arose from their failure to see the Torah as anything more than brilliant wisdom. Despite the obvious Divine imprimatur written all over it, the role that G-d plays as the Giver of the Torah eluded them. To regard Torah as anything less than G-d's infinite wisdom is a gross devaluation of its Divine worth. It would be akin to one who believes he has extracted a book's full depth of meaning when he has read only its table of contents.

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### **Blessing the Torah *First***

An interesting question arises at this point. According to the analysis above, their sin was that they did not recite the blessing at all. Yet in discussing the people's failure to observe this commandment, the Talmud stresses that they did not recite the blessing **first**. Why is reciting the blessing first such a significant factor in the study of Torah?

A contemporary work, *Minchas Asher*, answers by prefacing the analysis of the *Chinuch* (a Medieval work devoted to listing and explaining the 613 commandments) concerning the order of the blessing. The *Chinuch* contrasts two Biblical blessings, the blessings after eating a meal (*Birchas Hamazon*) and the blessing before learning Torah (*Birchas HaTorah*). *Chinuch* asks, why is it that the blessing for food is recited after the meal; whereas the blessing for the Torah is recited before learning?

*Chinuch's* explains that when we engage in a mundane behavior such as eating, we cannot be expected to express gratitude to G-d until we actually enjoy the food. Learning Torah, by contrast, is an intellectual exercise, and our intellect is capable of appreciating future benefits.

### **Bridges and Sandwiches**

One may apply this teaching to our current condition.

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We are situated between the last moments of Galus-exile and the beginning of the Final Redemption. Because we are the “bridge” generation, we may experience conflicting and often diametrically opposing emotions. On the one hand, we can view the unfolding of events through the shaded glasses of Galus which make everything seem dark and dreary. On the other hand, we can see the dawning rays of the future’s period of light on the horizon. We may be unable to stop vacillating between these modes of vision from one moment to the next. One moment we feel depressed and the next moment exhilarated.

The reason for our ambivalence derives from our generation being sandwiched between Galus and Redemption.

To better understand this paradoxical dynamic, we need to go back in history and see how it played out the first time we found ourselves in this type of situation.

Our Talmudic Sages inform us that on the Rosh Hashanah before the exodus from Egypt, the Jews had already been freed from slavery by means of the Ten Plagues even though they were still in Egypt.

Rosh Hashanah may thus be viewed as marking their entry into a period of limbo. They were not slaves but they were also not free. Until they crossed the Red Sea and were finally rid of the Egyptian threat, their situation was still

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precarious, sandwiched in between the Egyptian pursuers and total freedom.

Perhaps an even more apt comparison to our situation is the forty years spent wandering through the desert before the Jews finally entered the Land of Israel. On the one hand, commentators point to the “slave mentality” that plagued the liberated Jews, which is seen as the cause of their frequent rebellions. On the other hand, this “desert generation” has been characterized by our Sages as a “generation of knowledge,” raised as they were on heavenly food, Manna. This made them eminently qualified to receive the Torah. Indeed, even their sin of not wanting to enter the Promised Land is attributed to their superior spiritual status. They did not want to engage in the many mundane activities that would have become necessary for them to settle in the Land of Israel.

Which was it? Were they rebellious slaves or liberated spiritual beings?

The answer is that they were both. Those who live in a “sandwich” period can and do alternate from one extreme mindset to another. In addition, there are those who are more prone to the slave mindset and those who are more spiritually sensitive and in whom the Redemption dynamic resonates.

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### How to Open Ourselves to Redemption?

How do we suppress the interference of the Galus mindset and enable ourselves to be open to the Redemption mindset? The answer is through the study of Torah. Torah is untainted by Galus because it is the source of freedom.

Moses asked G-d how it would be possible for the Jews to be liberated from Egypt; what merit did they have? G-d responded by referring to the future giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Commentators ask how it was that an event that had yet to occur gave the Jews an anticipatory merit for their liberation?

One way to answer this question is that Moses was concerned that after being liberated what guarantee was there that they would not revert to their original slave mentality with all the attendant spiritual failures.

G-d's response was that their receiving the Torah at Sinai will instill in them a new mindset of freedom.

Our Sages in Ethics of the Fathers state clearly: "There is no free person other than one who studies Torah."

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### A Glitch

There can, however, be a glitch in this process. One can study Torah with Galus tainted eyes. What guarantee is there that we will not tamper with the liberating force of Torah?

The answer is: the blessings we recite before learning Torah, in which we invoke the Divine origin and nature of the Torah, compel us to see the Torah from G-d's perspective.

When the Jewish community at the end of the First Temple Era failed to recite that blessing, they lost the redemptive power of Torah and were rendered vulnerable to the hostile forces of Galus.

We can now understand the emphasis on their failure to recite the blessing first. Had they recited the blessing **after** the study it would have shown that they considered Torah study as no more than a delectable intellectual exercise, akin to eating a gourmet meal. The whole idea of reciting the blessing **before** commencing the study of Torah is to underscore that Torah study is, first and foremost, a G-dly exercise and that we must never impute our own human logic to the Divine character of Torah.

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### Lesson for Our Time

The lesson for our time is obvious. In order to empower ourselves to absorb the Redemptive energies that are in the air in this transitional period, we must study Torah. The most potent form of Torah study in this regard is the study of the sections of the Torah which deal explicitly with the subject of Redemption. However, when will this Torah study enjoy the greatest success? When we **preface** Torah study with the blessings on the Torah. That is when we consciously make an effort to see the Torah from G-d's vantage point, putting aside our own preconceived ideas and open ourselves to radically new ways of seeing the world.

There is another point to be made here. Recalling the Chinuch's analysis of the difference between when we say a blessing before an act and when we say it afterwards, we may take the above one step further.

If we view the Redemption strictly as a physical benefit, it is hard to imagine our Animal Souls being able to get excited about a utopia that has yet to materialize. It is akin to our need to say the Grace after Meals after the meal, because our bodies and Animal Souls cannot appreciate the good in a meal that has yet to be consumed.

If, however, we focus on the Redemption as primarily working a spiritual change, we can thank G-d for it even

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before it happens. The spiritual side of our personality does not need to experience the source of delight in order to appreciate its value, as the Chinuch stated.

When we study Torah with the proper introduction we condition ourselves to see the spiritual side of things. This helps us engender a sense of joy so that, together with the blessing on the Torah before we learn, we will also now sing praises to G-d for our future, but imminent, Redemption.

By the same token, we do not need to wait for the New Year to sing praise to G-d for all the good that we will enjoy in the future. We can be confident that G-d will inscribe and seal all of the Jewish people, indeed, the entire world, for a good and sweet year, and most importantly, a year of the true and complete Redemption!

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## ESSAY TWO

### TIKKUN OLAM?

In the literature of Kabbalah, Tikkun refers to the spiritual and G-dly sparks that are imprisoned in the physical world.

All physical objects contain powerful sparks of holiness but are incapable of expressing themselves.

By performing a Mitzvah, which invariably involves a physical object, we liberate these sparks from their entanglement with the physical.

As a result of the extraordinary G-dly energy that our Mitzvos release, the entire world is transformed into an utterly Divine world.

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## ESSAY TWO

### TIKKUN OLAM?

#### The Ultimate Song

The entire Torah is referred to as a song based on the poetic style of this week's parsha—*Ha'azinu*. It is said that this parsha encapsulates all of Jewish history and is, in a certain sense, a micro version of the Torah.

It is no surprise that this parsha is read either on the Shabbos that precedes Yom Kippur or the Shabbos that follows it. The pivotal nature of this parsha provides us with insight and inspiration preparing us to come before G-d on the holiest day of the year and reconnect with Him.

Moreover, the fact that we read this parsha at the anniversary of Creation indicates that it conveys a universal message; a message that relates to us, the recipients of the Torah, as it pertains to the entire world

In that spirit, let us reflect on one of the verses in this week's parsha:

### Seventy for Seventy

“When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when He separated the children of men, He set the borders of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel. For the portion of the L-rd is His people Jacob the lot of His inheritance.”

Rashi explains that this verse describes the way G-d created the 70 root nations after the Tower of Babel debacle. He chose the number 70 because it would correspond to the 70 members of the Patriarch Jacob's family. And despite the evil perpetrated by the nations before the flood and which continued while building the Tower of Babel, G-d preserved the 70 nations for the sake of Israel, who was to descend from Shem, the son of Noah.

The question may be raised, why is it so important to know that the number of nations correlates with the number of Jews who began our sojourn in Egypt so long ago? If the purpose of this verse is to establish the importance of the Jewish nation, for whose sake he preserved the other nations, notwithstanding their iniquity, what difference does it make if there were 70 nations and 70 original Jewish family members?

The answer lies in a better understanding of the role of the Jewish nation vis-à-vis the rest of humanity. The Jewish people were not chosen just for our own sake. We were

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chosen for a larger purpose that is both internal and external. Indeed, these two roles are interwoven.

### **Tikkun Olam: Social Justice?**

In recent times, we often hear people speaking of Tikkun Olam. In its contemporary incarnation, Tikkun Olam is understood as the Jewish people's need to repair the world by assisting the other nations, sticking up for the downtrodden and acting as the world's conscience.

In truth, while Judaism does indeed require Jews to spread their generosity and compassion beyond their own communities and to care for everyone, it does not encourage us to focus **all or most** of our attention on assisting non-Jewish interests, while neglecting Jewish needs.

The above sentiment is clearly enunciated in the Talmud and other authoritative Jewish texts. It is neatly summed up by the popular adage: "Charity begins at home." Without getting into the minute details of this law, suffice it to say that our primary focus should be directed toward our own Jewish community.

To be sure, the Talmud exhorts us to not be content with helping our own but also give to others, beyond our own community. The rationale for that extended charity is not

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based on the spirit of Tikkun Olam, but rather with an entirely separate principle, which is: *Darkei Shalom*-Peaceful ways. By extending a helping hand to others, we promote peace and harmony, one of Judaism's most important ideals.

If reaching out to other nations is *Darkei Shalom*, and not Tikkun Olam, what then is Tikkun Olam?

To answer that question we must trace the phrase Tikkun Olam to its liturgical, Talmudic and Kabbalistic roots.

### In the Liturgy

In the *Aleinu* prayer (composed by Joshua, Moses' successor, recited thrice daily and incorporated in the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy), we beseech G-d to "repair the world (alternatively, "establish the world") under the sovereignty of G-d." In the context of prayer it expresses our hope that the nations of the world will cease to worship idols and eventually recognize the sovereignty of one G-d. It is clearly not a prayer about Jewish activism for universal social justice but rather the abolition of false gods and the values they embody.

The lack of a moral foundation drives much of the breakdown of societal norms of ethics and morality that necessitate activism to repair the world. The secularization

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of the world, with its concomitant secular humanistic approach to ethics and morality, undermines the very efforts society makes to civilize itself.

An ethical system that is situational, relativistic and constantly evolving cannot claim to be better than the system it replaced or the systems that will come to replace it.

Secular humanistic morality, with its relativistic ethics, may occasionally come up with an ethical approach that is temporarily consistent with G-d's absolute approach to morality; far more often, it will leave us groping in the dark and remain a root cause of the breakdown of modern society.

When the nations of the world—to whom we are commanded by G-d to teach morality based on the Seven Noahide commandments—recognize that all valid morality derives from one immutable G-d, whose moral teachings are also unchangeable, our world will be repaired and social justice will prevail.

### **In the Talmud**

When we turn to the Talmud, we see that Tikkun Olam refers to the rabbinic enactments that were designed to safeguard Jewish law and Jewish life. Tikkun Olam has

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absolutely nothing to do with our relationship with other nations. It is all about preserving the integrity of the Torah and of the Jewish community.

Although it appears at first glance to be a wholly insular ideal, Tikkun Olam does have an impact on the outside world as well. When our observance of Jewish law is flawless and the integrity of our own Jewish society is protected, we can be so much more effective in influencing others and help them repair their own breaches.

Moreover, if the highest form of Tzedakah is to teach a person how to stand on his own two feet the same is true with respect to spiritual Tzedakah. If we want the world to be governed by social justice, we must give them the tools to achieve that. We provide the tools, first, by serving as an example, a "light unto the nations."

In addition, as Maimonides' instruct us, we must do our part by teaching the Seven Noahide Commandments (which are actually seven categories of commandments) to non-Jews. These commandments are: to reject idolatry; not to blaspheme G-d; not to commit theft; not to commit murder; not to commit sexual crimes; not to eat an animal without first killing it; and to establish a judiciary.

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### In Kabbalah

In the literature of Kabbalah, Tikkun refers to the spiritual and G-dly sparks that are imprisoned in the physical world. All physical objects contain powerful sparks of holiness but are incapable of expressing themselves. By performing a Mitzvah, which invariably involves a physical object, we liberate these sparks from their entanglement with the physical. As a result of the extraordinary G-dly energy that our Mitzvos release, the entire world is transformed into an utterly Divine world.

Where are these sparks of G-dly energy most potent and ubiquitous? The answer is in the countries of the other nations. In short, our exile amongst the other nations is purposeful, and affords us the opportunity to reach and liberate the most powerful sparks.

Towards this goal, the Jewish people have been scattered by exile to the places where the sparks of holiness are most securely ensconced and imprisoned. With our performance of Mitzvos in exile, our resistance to assimilation and by overcoming all the obstacles posed by our existence among the nations, we can liberate these sparks and successfully change the world and repair it under the sovereignty of G-d.

This explains why the Torah connects the 70 nations to the 70 original Israelites. It underscores the mission of the

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Jewish people to the 70 nations (through the promulgation of the 7 Noahide Mitzvos). The power to achieve this was given to us when Jacob entered into Egypt, the first and forerunner of all subsequent exiles, with 70 souls.

### **The Process of Liberating Sparks is Over!**

When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil they were responsible for the intermingling of good and evil in our world.

The Rebbe, with his unparalleled knowledge of all facets of Torah, coupled with his prophetic vision, informed us that the perennial mission of liberating the sparks that were scattered when Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit has drawn to a close!

Our mission now, the Rebbe stated, is to prepare ourselves and those around us for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption, at which time we will see the fruit of our labors. We will be privileged to see a world that is fully repaired, in every sense of the word; a world that will experience genuine and everlasting peace.

Peace, and all the other blessings promised by the Torah for the Messianic Age, will come about as we are inundated with an acute awareness of G-d's presence. All of the

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energy generated by our Mitzvos today will be ours to harness for the total repair and elevation of our world.

At that time we will also see how—in the words of the Torah in this week's parsha at the end of the song—"The nations will sing praises for His people..." The nations of the world will also be rectified and will sing praises for the Jewish people.

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## ESSAY THREE

# RAIN OR SUKKAH

The Sukkah conveys an overarching message of faith and trust in G-d exclusively.

The Sukkah reorients our egocentric way of thinking into a G-d centric manner of thinking.

The Sukkah reminds us of the way our own understanding and our own initiatives are inherently limited.

The Sukkah is the antidote to self-serving rituals that often masquerade as religious devotion.

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## ESSAY THREE

### RAIN OR SUKKAH

#### Protection from the Rain

This week's parsha features the special song of Ha'azinu, which opens with a description of Torah as rain and dew that G-d showers on us.

In Hebrew there are two words for rain. One is geshem and the other is matar. Why does the Torah use the word matar when discussing the Torah's teachings that flow down to us?

This week's parsha coincides with the Festival of Sukkos. There is always a connection between a holiday and the Torah portion read in close proximity to the holiday. What connection can we find between the idea of rain and the holiday of Sukkos?

When the Talmud discusses the commandment to dwell in a Sukkah, it cites the Biblical prophecy that G-d will act as a protective Sukkah. This Sukkah, the prophet Isaiah declares, will be "for shade in the day-time from the heat, and a refuge and for a covert from storm (*zerem*) and

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from rain (*matar*).” Here, too, the word *matar* is used for rain.

However, the references to rain in these two sources are diametrically opposite. In the parsha, rain is a positive metaphor for the Torah, which nurtures like rain, whereas in the citation from Isaiah, the Sukkah protects us from the rain.

### **248, not 247 or 249**

To reconcile these two sources and to better understand the role of the Sukkah in relation to rain, there is an interesting commentary by the great Kabbalist, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson (the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s father) that the word for storm and rain in the abovementioned verse, *zerem* and *matar*, have the numerical value of 247 and 249, respectively.

There are 248 positive commandments (i.e., the commandments of the Torah that tell us what to do as opposed to the negative commandments that detail the prohibitions of the Torah). The Torah commands us not to add on to the commandments or subtract any of them. Thus, the deeper significance of the Sukkah discussed in Isaiah is that it protects us from 247—subtracting a Mitzvah—and from 249—adding on a new Mitzvah.

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It is also interesting to note that the very word Sukkah, when spelled phonetically (*samach, vav, chaf, hei*), numerically adds up to 248!

The Sukkah thus represents and underscores the integrity of the Divine commandments; there are no less than 248 and no more than 248.

What is it about the Sukkah that is so protective?

To understand the protective quality of the Sukkah, we ought to first understand what could be wrong with adding on a new Mitzvah? If 248 are desirable, one would think that a 249<sup>th</sup> mitzvah would be even more desirable.

The truth is that the difference between 248 and 249 is the difference between doing a Mitzvah for G-d's sake or for our own sake.

### Who are we Serving?

A simple analogy to illustrate this point is the person who gives a gift to show affection to a loved one, but brings him or her something that the giver enjoys but the recipient does not. If one starts to think about that gift, one will come to the honest realization that the purpose of the gift is to assuage the giver's own feelings and make him or her feel comfortable. Rather than giving a gift, one is merely patting one's own ego. If the gift is ostensibly

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motivated by love, one has to question whether the gift is an expression of love for the recipient or is actually evidence of self-love.

[To be sure, there are times when giving of a gift is not really to benefit anyone, but rather as a gesture on the part of the giver to show that he or she is thinking of the recipient. This is the “theory” behind the offering of sacrifices to G-d who, obviously, does not need our sacrifices.]

In the context of serving G-d it assumes an even more ominous tone. When we give G-d a gift He did not ask for, we have to ask ourselves: Are we serving Him or are we serving ourselves? Who is it that is truly the object of our love—G-d or ourselves?

And once we degenerate into a mindset of spiritual independence by adding on to G-d's commandments, we could just as easily go from 249 to 247; we will invariably find ways of decreasing the number of commandments that do not sit well with our spiritual comfort zone.

When our religion is based exclusively or primarily on our own understanding and how it resonates with us, we are likely to focus on “what is in it for me.” With that mindset, we begin to search for independence from authority [ as we] self-righteously looking for ways to add on commandment number 249. We let our spiritual passion

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“rain” down on us and seek other unauthorized and inauthentic avenues to express our spirituality.

The Sukkah conveys an overarching (pun intended) message of faith and trust in G-d exclusively.

The Sukkah reorients our egocentric way of thinking into a G-d centric manner of thinking.

The Sukkah reinforces our faith in G-d as the only one upon whom we can depend even when all the signs point in the opposite direction.

The Sukkah reminds us of the way our own understanding and our own initiatives are inherently limited. It therefore helps to free us from our delusional insistence that we can devise our own rituals to take the place of the ones ordained by G-d.

The Sukkah is the antidote to self-serving rituals that often masquerade as religious devotion.

### **Whose Home are You In?**

There is another way of explaining how the Sukkah assists us in ridding ourselves of the pitfall represented by the numbers 249 and 247.

It's like a person who is invited as a guest to someone's home. While they may feel free to do things in their own

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home, they are more respectful, reticent and cautious before doing things in their host's home.

While we dwell in the Sukkah we feel that we are dwelling in G-d's home and we act accordingly. Our focus becomes G-d oriented rather than oriented on the self.

The Sukkah is thus the protective home that is permeated with G-dly awareness that helps us escape the obsession with self.

### **Why does Sukkos Follow Yom Kippur?**

Perhaps this provides a reason why the Holiday of Sukkos follows Yom Kippur. During Yom Kippur—and the forty days preceding Yom Kippur—we are required to engage in soul-searching. We are preoccupied with our selfhood. Introspection and soul searching are not only appropriate but indispensable for this time of the year. This is the path to purification and catharsis.

However, there is a drawback to this type of approach. We can get so obsessed with self-examination that everything we do begins to revolve around ourselves. We could then cease serving and loving G-d. Instead, we begin to serve and love ourselves in the guise of serving Him.

We therefore have the Holiday of Sukkos to allow us to undergo a paradigm shift from living in our own cocoon of

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self-absorption to dwelling in G-d's Sukkah and becoming G-d-centric.

### **Good Rain and Bad Rain**

There is, however, a major caveat to all of this.

While we have a commandment not to add on, we know that the rabbis have instituted many additional rituals and observances. In addition, Jewish customs have blossomed and given us important holidays. Chanukah and Simchas Torah are examples of Holidays that are rooted in rabbinical law and Jewish custom, respectively. Moreover, the Chassidic movement added so much more to Jewish life than just compliance with the 248.

How do we reconcile this with the prohibition of adding on any commandments?

This question has been addressed by many, including Maimonides. Maimonides' simple answer is that the rabbis did not claim to be adding another Biblical command. They made it clear that their commandments were of a rabbinical nature. And, it is the Torah itself that instructed the rabbis to add on these rabbinical ordinances and to respect Jewish custom.

Chassidic thought goes a step further. All of the rabbinical commandments are merely offshoots and extensions of the

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original Biblical ones. All innovative customs are designed, not to add on to any of the Mitzvos, but to enhance them and express their inner soul.

The criteria to adding on to the commandments are:

- (a) Recognition that the 248 are G-d's sacrosanct domain, and we may not tamper with them. And whether or not we like them, we dedicate ourselves to their observance. When we enter the Sukkah of G-d's commandments, we are entering into His turf and we do them on His terms;
- (b) Recognition that the additional measures are intended to preserve, enhance and embellish the 248. The 248 must be nurtured by the 249; and,
- (c) Recognition that these additional measures are ultimately also G-d's will, and although they may express a certain subjective spiritual dynamic, they are first and foremost expressions of G-d's will.

We can now resolve the question that was asked at the beginning of this essay: How do we reconcile the reference to matar in the parsha which refers approvingly to the Torah as rain with the citation from Isaiah in which the Sukkah is depicted as the structure that shields us from the matar?

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In truth, matar, with its symbolism of 249, is a positive phenomenon when it is in the context of the entire verse that reads: “**My** teachings shall drop as the rain... as the small rain on the tender grass... For I will proclaim the name of the L-rd, ascribe you greatness unto our G-d.” Upon close examination, all three criteria are indicated here.

When we emphasize that the matar is: (a) “**My** teaching”, (b) nurturing like “rain on the tender grass...”, and (c) when we bless G-d for this rain and that the rain (matar-249) for which we express our gratitude **is also from G-d**, those additions, symbolized by rain-matar-249, are positive and holy.

### No Raining on our Party

The Messianic Age is, in the abovementioned verse from Isaiah, likened to a Sukkah. In the Messianic Age we will have no worry about the harmful additions or subtractions, but we will simultaneously reap the benefits of novel levels of observance and understanding. Hence the prophet declares: “A new Torah shall emerge.” This does not mean, G-d forbid, that the Torah will change, but that we will enjoy heretofore concealed dimensions of knowledge and observances that will be fully revealed at that time.

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And since we will be dwelling and fully ensconced in the ultimate G-dly Sukkah, which symbolizes the 248 Mitzvos, we will have no fear of the additions (read: Matar) raining on our feast.

## ESSAY FOUR

### AS AN EAGLE

In the future we will gracefully fly like eagles over the waters.

This means that we will have the ability to fathom the most esoteric and elusive G-dly knowledge with relative ease.

The most profound and heretofore unfathomable levels of Torah knowledge will be available to us.

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## ESSAY FOUR

### AS AN EAGLE

#### Engulfed in a Sea of Knowledge

“As an eagle that stirs up her nest, hovers over her young, spreads abroad her wings, taking them, bearing them on her pinions.”

According to the Midrash this prophetic verse that appears in this week’s parsha, alludes to the future when G-d shall “destroy” the world—the entire world will be engulfed in the sea of Heavenly knowledge—but Israel will be provided with wings as eagles, as it were, and they will “float on the surface of the waters.”

Obviously, the Midrash was speaking allegorically when it says that Israel will be provided with wings to fly over the waters.

The following is an abridged exposition of this enigmatic matter based on the teachings of Kabbalah and Chassidic literature.

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### **Upper and Lower Waters**

When the world was created, Genesis relates, the world was covered with water. On the second day of creation G-d separated between the “upper waters” and the “lower waters.”

The “lower” and “upper” waters represent two levels of knowledge, inasmuch as water is a Biblical metaphor for knowledge. The “upper waters” refer to the Divine celestial, unfiltered knowledge and the “lower waters” represent the knowledge associated with the natural order, i.e., the wisdom contained within science, philosophy and other “worldly” domains of knowledge.

Before the separation of these waters on the second day of creation, the two areas of knowledge were one. This means that the so-called secular areas of wisdom were subsumed within Torah wisdom, which is its ultimate source.

### **Returning to Pre-Separation Days**

In the future Messianic Age (in its more advanced stages) the world will return to its pre-separation era. The word of G-d that animates physical existence (the area of wisdom that is related to creation) will be reintegrated into the more G-dly Torah realm. The “lower waters” and “upper waters” will once again be united.

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In the future we will gracefully fly like eagles over the waters. This means that we will have the ability to fathom the most esoteric and elusive G-dly knowledge with relative ease. The most profound and heretofore unfathomable levels of Torah knowledge will be available to us.

The upcoming Festival of Sukkos is known as the time when we are judged for water. Literally this means that during this Holiday G-d decides how much rain we will receive in the rainy season. But on a spiritual plane this can mean that Sukkos is when we are judged as to the extent we will be able to plumb the depths of spiritual knowledge.

The more we get into the spirit of the Festival by eating in a Sukkah and especially by taking the “four kinds” of plants (Lulav, Etrog, Hadassim, Arovot) that grow and thrive on water, we will merit to become like eagles and gracefully fly over the waters of Divine knowledge.

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## ESSAY FIVE

### CLOSER TO HEAVEN

Because we are in many ways feeling the rays of light of the future in the present, we are that much more likely to experience the closeness to heaven that is unique to Moses and is manifest in these Ten Days of Teshuvah than in the past.

Today, everybody with relatively minimal effort can access this spiritual dimension.

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## ESSAY FIVE

### CLOSER TO HEAVEN

#### **Overshadowed or Reinforced?**

This week's Torah portion of Ha'azinu can sometimes be overshadowed by the fact that this Shabbos is known as Shabbos Shuva-the Sabbath of Return. The reason for this designation is twofold: First it is one of the Ten Days of Teshuvah (repentance or return). Second, it is the opening word of the Prophetic reading of this Shabbos: Shuva Yisrael-Return O Israel.

But upon deeper reflection we can see that there is a close connection between the parsha of Ha'azinu that we read this week and the fact that this is Shabbos Shuva.

The obvious connection lies in the thrust of this parsha. It is almost entirely a song of rebuke (if there was ever an oxymoron, but we'll leave that for another occasion) intended to inspire the people to stay loyal to the dictates of the Torah and for those who have strayed it is a message to return.

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But one could also find a connection between the specific themes of this parsha and the Teshuvah imperative of this Shabbos. We will examine on of these connections.

### **Moses and Isaiah: Who is Closer to What?**

The parsha begins with the statement uttered by Moses to the Jewish people in his last day: "Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and may the earth hear the words of my mouth."

The Midrash observes that Moses first addresses the heavens and then the earth. By contrast, the prophet Isaiah reverses the order; first he addresses the earth and then the heavens.

A second difference between Moses' address and Isaiah's is that Moses uses the expression "Ha'azinu-give ear" when addressing the heavens and the word "hear" for the earth, whereas Isaiah employs "Ha'azinu-give ear" for the earth and "hear" for the heavens. The simple difference between the expression "give ear" and "hear" is that "give ear" implies that the one who is expected to listen is close to the speaker, whereas the word hear could suggest that the listener is far away.

The Midrash explains these two variations thus:

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Moses, the greatest of all the prophets, was closer to the heavens. He thus addressed them first using the expression that connotes their close proximity to him. Isaiah was closer to the earth. He therefore prefaces the earth and uses the expression that connotes closeness when he addresses the earth.

In short: Moses was closer to the heavens and Isaiah was closer to the earth.

### **Spark of Moses in Everyone**

In Chassidic literature we are taught that every one of us possesses a spark of Moses, and that everything that the Torah says about Moses can be applied to every individual. How do we apply the seemingly remote and elusive ideal of having the heavens closer to us than the earth?

The truth is that in most cases we are certainly closer to the earth, i.e. material needs, logical perceptions, human nature, sensual pleasure and the more conventional aspects of existence.

But there are times when, oddly, we are closer to the heavens. There are times when the spiritual resonates in us; when we feel detached from the physical reality and find comfort and solace in prayer, meditation, and solitude. These are times when we feel close to G-d and are

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convinced not only of His existence, but moreover, of His presence in our lives. These are the times that we feel we can speak to G-d just as Moses would, “face to face.”

And while most people have these heavenly feelings sporadically, unannounced and unexpected, there is one period every year when all of us have the potential to experience this closeness to G-d, when we can say to G-d “Give ear.”

I am referring to the period of the Ten Days of Teshuvah concerning which our Sages invoke the verse: “Seek G-d when He is available, call out to Him when He is close.” This, our Sages declare, refers to the period we are in presently—the Ten Days of Teshuvah. In these ten days, and particularly, during the Shabbos—a day of spiritual tranquility—of this period, each and every one of us can discover his or her affinity to G-d.

### **Nexus of Two Periods**

In terms of history, we are situated on the nexus of two periods: the period known as Galus-exile characterized by the way G-d is concealed, and the period referred to as the Messianic Era characterized by enhanced G-d-consciousness.

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Because we are in many ways feeling the rays of light of the future in the present, we are that much more likely to experience the closeness to heaven that is unique to Moses and is manifest in these Ten Days of Teshuvah and this Shabbos-Shuvah than in all preceding times.

In the past, only spiritually elite people had the luxury of having a personal relationship with G-d and experiencing spiritual and mystical feelings. Today, everybody with relatively minimal effort can access this spiritual dimension.

And while we have free choice to resist feeling G-dly during this annual period of the Ten Days of Teshuvah and the prelude to the Age of Redemption we are in, when we “let go” of our “defenses” against feeling and acting spiritual, we will discover the beauty and awesomeness of this Moses-closer-to-heaven experience.

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## ESSAY SIX

### RETURN TO RETURNING

In the Age of Moshiach we will fully experience all of the qualities and all of the accomplishments of the past.

The difference between the past and the future, however, is that in the past the world's qualities were incompatible with progress.

In the future, we will recapture the innocence of the past and maintain it, even as we experience the most advanced spiritual experiences of the future.

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## ESSAY SIX

### RETURN TO RETURNING

#### A Special Shabbos

This Shabbos is known as *Shabbos Shuvah*, the Sabbath of Repentance, or, more accurately, The Sabbath of Return. The obvious focus of this Sabbath – and of the entire period from the beginning of the Month of Elul through Yom Kippur – is to return to the path of Torah.

There can also be another dimension to this Sabbath of Return. This is especially true considering the fact that the word Shabbos itself contains the word *Tashev*, which means return. Accordingly, we might say that this Sabbath is the Return to Returning.

#### Secular versus Jewish Progress

Our world is a world obsessed with progress. And this is the way it should be. We are constantly moving forward. This is true not only in the technological sense, but also in the spiritual sense. Indeed, one of the signs of life is

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movement and growth. Judaism does not allow the individual to stop, to stagnate.

But, Jewish progress, unlike secular progress and movement, requires of us to occasionally redirect our energies, by driving in reverse. This does not mean that we should allow ourselves to backslide, and it certainly does not suggest that we should deliberately regress.

What this notion of return means is to return to the qualities and characteristics of earlier stages of life as well as to return to the earlier stages of our history.

A little child is blessed with innocence. Youth is characterized by its intensity and energy. A person in his/her twenties waxes idealistic. People in their thirties through the first half of life experience creativity. This is when we engage in building our homes and families and, establishing institutions that are the bedrock of society.

Every new phase of life introduces us into new realms and new challenges. All this progress and change is positive if not for the fact that it is usually at the expense of some earlier quality that we lose.

### **Recapturing Youthful Innocence and Creativity**

Shabbos Shuvah, teaches us to return to returning. There are times that we have to look back, not for nostalgic

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reasons, but, in order to recapture some of the qualities we left behind.

To return, then, is to recapture the youthful innocence, energy, enthusiasm and creativity we left behind when we matured.

Our personal lives parallel the historical development of the Jewish people. While, every generation represents progress and growth; while new spiritual vistas are constantly being opened before us, we must return and recapture the unique qualities of the past, even as we forge ahead and conquer new territory.

### **Returning to the Future**

This notion of return is also inherent in the Jewish view of Redemption. In the Messianic Age, there will be new revelations of G-dly energy. There will also be a concomitant return to the past, i.e., to the innocence and pristine nature of existence, that characterized the world at the time of creation.

In the Age of Moshiach we will fully experience all of the qualities and all of the accomplishments of the past. The difference between the past and the future, however, is that in the past the world's qualities were incompatible with progress. In the future, we will recapture the innocence of

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the past and maintain it, even as we experience the most advanced spiritual experiences of the future

## ESSAY SEVEN

# REPENT YE NON SINNERS

There are two levels of Teshuvah

The lower level of Teshuvah with its focus on the remorse that we must feel for our past invariably evokes feelings of sadness and discontent.

The higher level, by contrast, with its focus on our soul re-connecting with G-d, is punctuated with joy.

It is akin to the feeling of a child that is reunited with its parents that it has not seen for a long time.

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## ESSAY SEVEN

### REPENT YE NON SINNERS

#### The Distinction of Shabbos Shuvah

*Shabbos Shuvah* (Shabbos of repentance or return) is the name accorded to this Sabbath. What do we mean when we refer to this Shabbos as one of Teshuvah? Aren't all "Ten days of Teshuvah" dedicated to this theme? What distinguishes *Shabbos Shuvah* from all the other days that are associated with Teshuvah?.

#### The Real Meaning of Teshuvah

It has been pointed out frequently in past messages that Teshuvah does not mean repentance but rather return. But even this concept of return can be understood on two levels.

Let us take the example of the thief. For him to do Teshuvah, the first thing he must do is to return the stolen object. He must then ask the grieved party for forgiveness,

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confess his actions to G-d, express remorse and regret, resolve never to commit this crime again and to accept G-d's authority in all matters of life. In this mode, one is indeed returning to the path of righteousness and goodness that is the norm. Judaism views the criminal act as the aberration and not the righteous act. Thus, Teshuvah is very plainly a return to the normal and natural path of goodness.

There is, however, a deeper understanding of the concept of return inherent in Teshuvah. When one does Teshuvah, the soul is returned to its original Divine source. The soul is a G-dly force that animates our bodies.

When we sin, we cause our souls to detach themselves from their true and natural state of existence which is Divine.

Furthermore, when we allow the soul to be instrumental in the commission of a transgression, we are, in effect, diverting the Divine energy that the soul possesses and channeling it into the evil act. There can be no greater alienation for the Divine essence of our soul.

Teshuvah, from this vantage point, is the return of our soul to its Divine source and the removal of the Divine energy from its involvement in behavior that is foreign and incongruous with the nature of the soul.

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### Two Levels of Teshuvah

These two levels of Teshuvah are known as *Teshuvah Tata'ah*-the Lower Level of Teshuvah and *Teshuvah Ila'ah*-the Higher level of Teshuvah, respectively.

There are two salient differences between these two modes of Teshuvah.

First, the lower level of Teshuvah with its focus on the evil that we've performed and the remorse that we must feel, invariably evokes feelings of sadness and discontent. The higher level, by contrast, with its focus on our soul re-connecting with G-d, is punctuated with joy. It is akin to the feeling of a child that is reunited with its parents that it has not seen for a long time.

Second, for one to perform the lower level of Teshuvah, one must be a sinner. But everyone can and must perform the higher level of Teshuvah. Even the greatest *Tzadik* (righteous person) who has not sinned, must seek to return his/her soul to G-d. In other words, one does not have to be a rebel to re-connect. No matter how close we feel to G-d, we can never be as close to Him as we were before our soul "descended" into our physical bodies. Thus, even the most righteous person must do Teshuvah.

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**Shabbos Shuvah: Teshuvah with Joy**

This too is the message of *Shabbos Shuvah*:

Shabbos, as a day of joy, emphasizes the need for us to realize the higher, joyous level of re-connection and not be content with all of the remorse and resolve we expressed previously. While all that is necessary to correct our misdeeds, it does not suffice for us to reinforce our connection with G-d.

This too is what our Sages meant when they said that Moshiach will inspire even *Tzadikim* (perfectly righteous people) to do Teshuvah. Moshiach, after inspiring all of us to divorce ourselves from evil, will continue to inspire us to realize the higher level of Teshuvah as well.

## ESSAY EIGHT

# LIVING IN THE PRESENT

On Yom Kippur we are given a respite from the obsession with the past and the anxiety over the future.

We can live fully in the here and now, if only for a 24 hour period.

To show how much we savor these precious moments, we sound the shofar at the end of the day and declare "Next year in Jerusalem!"

We thereby declare that when G-d will herald the future Redemption by sounding the Great Shofar, we will be in a perpetual state of "here and now," where every moment will be lived to the fullest extent.

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## ESSAY EIGHT

### LIVING IN THE PRESENT

#### What *Now*?

Preparations for Yom Kippur have already begun a month before Rosh Hashanah, during the month of *Elul*. That entire month was to be devoted to introspection and stock taking, resolutions and commitments, repentance and renewal. If that did not suffice, we were given the Ten days of Repentance, also known as the Days of Awe, starting with Rosh Hashanah, followed by seven days of *Teshuvah*, each day corresponding to a day of the week of the past year.

During thi period we also have Shabbos Shuvah, the Shabbos of Return. And after all of that intense preparation we finally arrive at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

It is at this point that the question begs to be asked: What is it that is new about this day? If an entire month, and then some, did not suffice for us to mend our ways and make sincere resolutions for the future, what more can we be expected to accomplish on Shabbos Shuvah and Yom

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Kippur?

### Remorse for the Past or Resolve for the Future?

To answer this question, let us refer to a statement from the Midrash, commenting on the word “Now,” which appeared in last week’s parsha.

The Midrash states that,

“The expression “now” refers exclusively to Teshuvah.”

What does that mean?

When a person repents, there are two elements that are most pronounced: Regret for one’s behavior in the **past** and a sincere resolution for the **future**. There is, however, a third element that transcends and unifies the two others.

To explain: Some people will be sorry they did something wrong, but lack the spiritual strength to make changes for the future. In the words of our Sages: “The wicked are always full of regrets.” While they might realize the error of their ways, they lack the determination to translate their remorse into a changed or even improved behavior in the future.

Conversely, there are some who find it relatively easy to make resolutions, especially at the beginning of the year.

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They do have difficulty in really feeling contrite about their past. They would rather put their past behind them, forget it, ignore it; they cannot deal with it. The problem is that notwithstanding their sincere resolve for the future, not having eradicated their desire for their errant behavior, they are likely to succumb to temptation the next time around.

### Elul Focuses on the Past

The month of *Elul* was primarily for dealing with the past. Rosh Hashanah is the day that we accept G-d as our King. The days that follow, we added the dimension of resolve for the future.

It can be suggested that on Yom Kippur—in addition to reinforcing these elements of Teshuvah—we deal with the “here and now” dimension as well.

### Becoming a Yom Kippur Person

Instead of just focusing on our **past** misdeeds or on resolving for the **future**, on Yom Kippur we discover who we really are **now**. Our essential bond with G-d is revealed.

And when we know who we are, regretting the past and resolving for the future are no longer the overriding issue. The purity of our soul that comes to the surface prevent

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any of the past entanglements from getting in our way. We don't have to generate feelings of remorse, because we are now new people, completely detached from the negativity of the past. Similarly, because of our new spiritual status, we do not require resolutions for the future. Being a Yom Kippur person is, in and of itself, the most forceful repudiation of a negative past and a positive future.

On a still deeper and more mystical plane it can be said that on Yom Kippur we rise to a level of timelessness, where the past and future are consolidated into the present.

### **Kol Nidrei**

With this premise we can better understand the significance of the *Kol Nidrei* prayer recited at the beginning of Yom Kippur.

Many have asked, what does the renunciation of vows have to do with Yom Kippur? And why is it such a solemn prayer, considering that it is just a legal formula to guarantee that we will not be guilty of breaking any of our future vows?

The answer lies in the foregoing premise that Teshuvah—especially on Yom Kippur—goes beyond remorse for the

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past and resolution for the future. It is about the **present** attachment to G=d.

As such, on Yom Kippur we no longer need to make vows and commitments for the future because our present attachment to G-d—revealed and actualized throughout Yom Kippur—will distance us from our errant past and keep us straight in the future.

We therefore renounce our vows, in the *Kol Nidrei* service, as a way of saying: we do not need to keep ourselves straight by making vows, we can accomplish the same by allowing our spiritual essence to be actualized on Yom Kippur.

Perhaps this is the meaning of the verse in this week's Parsha:

“See **now**, for it is I. I am the only, there is no other G-d with Me.”

One interpretation of this verse is that when we realize our G-dly identity, that I, the person, is indeed imbued with “I, the only one” G-d, then one can see and appreciate the here and **now**.

### **Burdened with the Past**

One of the characteristics of living in an imperfect world is that we can rarely focus on the “now” of life, because we

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are burdened by the past and worried about the future. This preoccupation with the past and the future often robs us of the ability to experience fully the present. Our life, in effect, becomes a series of fleeting and elusive moments. This is one of the major ills associated with exile.

On Yom Kippur, however, we are given a respite from the obsession with the past and the anxiety over the future. We can live fully in the here and now, if only for a 24 hour period. To show how much we savor these precious moments, we sound the shofar at the end of the day and declare "Next year in Jerusalem!" We thereby declare that when G-d will herald the future Redemption by sounding the Great Shofar, we will be in a perpetual state of "here and now," where every moment will be lived to the fullest extent.

## ESSAY NINE

# FOUR INGREDIENTS OF TESHUVAH

The most basic requirement for Teshuvah is a resolution  
for the future.

A thief who wishes to repent, must resolve to never steal  
again.

But that resolve is unlikely to endure without the thief  
truly experiencing remorse and regret for the past, the  
second component of Teshuvah.

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## ESSAY NINE

### FOUR INGREDIENTS OF TESHUVAH

#### Can We Change?

Teshuvah, usually translated as repentance, but more accurately as return, is a process that permeates the Jewish calendar from the beginning of Elul through Yom Kippur. But at no time is the theme of Teshuvah so prominent as in the Ten Days of Teshuvah in general and the Shabbos Teshuvah (the Sabbath of Teshuvah) in particular.

By Divine providence, the entire country is now discussing the issue of repentance. What does it take to procure atonement? How does one change? Should we accept the person who claims to have repented? These are some of the questions that have been discussed recently.

#### The Anatomy of Teshuvah

Fortunately for us, the Jewish religion has had much to say about Teshuvah. Let us proceed with a breakdown of the most important components of Teshuvah as they were understood by our Talmudic sages, Maimonides, R. Shneur

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Zalman of Liadi and the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

The most basic requirement for Teshuvah is a resolution for the future. For example:

A thief who wishes to repent, must resolve to never steal again. How do we know that his resolution is sincere? According to Jewish law, his intentions must be supported by action. Obviously, he must return all the stolen goods he has in his possession. Secondly, he must destroy all the “tools” of his trade. When actions demonstrate his sincere resolve not to commit this crime again, he can once more be accepted into the community and serve as a witness in a court.

But that resolve is unlikely to endure without the thief truly experiencing remorse and regret for the past, the second component of Teshuvah.

### **Taking Responsibility**

True regret involves taking full responsibility for one's misdeeds. To regret the past and then give excuses for oneself, misses the whole point of Teshuvah.

For Teshuvah to be complete, one must take full responsibility for one's actions. Indeed, the Rebbe explains why Maimonides includes the discussion of free choice in the section of his *Mishneh Torah*, that discusses Teshuvah:

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The very notion of change dictates that one has control of his/her behavior. If one believes that we do not have free choice — and that all our actions of good and evil are predetermined — then we cannot be held responsible for our actions and we cannot change.

### Confession of Sins

In addition to the resolve for the future and contrition for the past one must also confess one's sins, for the process of Teshuvah to be complete. As painful as it may be, by confessing our sins, we reinforce that we have taken full responsibility for our actions. Furthermore, even if our remorse was half-hearted, the verbal confession will make it more sincere and more profound.

In addition, the **emotional** experience of remorse can counter the **emotions** that one experienced while he committed the forbidden act. When we confess verbally, however, the physical **act** of speech is endowed with the power to neutralize the forbidden **action**.

### Asking for Forgiveness

One final requirement for Teshuvah to be complete is to ask for forgiveness by G-d and by our fellow human being against whom we may have sinned.

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The formal request for forgiveness places an onus on the one who was wronged to take note of our sincere regret. According to Jewish law, as a general rule, when one has asked for forgiveness three times, it is mandatory that the wronged individual grant that forgiveness.

According to Maimonides, one of the prerequisites for the Messianic Age is Teshuvah. In this season of Teshuvah, we can approach G-d with the request — and even demand — that He keep His promise to bring about the Redemption, with the coming of Moshiach.

## ESSAY TEN

# DON'T SELL OURSELVES SHORT

We have to be brutally honest, and not try to gloss over our faults and transgressions.

Finding mitigating circumstances is commendable when judging others. It is the wrong approach when engaging in self-examination and repentance.

We must not say to G-d, "I transgressed, but..." We must take full responsibility for all of our actions.

We must also realize that we possess pure, pristine and holy souls that can never be corrupted even by the worst of sins.

We are royalty and we therefore can afford to be honest about our shortcomings. Only the president can assume full responsibility for his mistakes and state: "The buck stops here."

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## ESSAY TEN

### DON'T SELL OURSELVES SHORT

#### A Song of Praises and Rebukes

This week's parsha—Ha'azinu—is referred to in the Torah itself as the song Moses taught the Jewish people before his passing and before they were to enter into the Promised Land.

Much of this song is actually a combination of praises and rebukes of the Jewish people. The fact that it was communicated by way of a song and not prose was to soften the rebuke. Moreover, upon deeper reflection, even the criticisms of the Jewish people were veiled hints to their greatness and the love G-d has for them.

One of the criticisms that reflect this idea reads:

“Is this how you repay G-d, you disgraceful, unwise people? Is He not your father, your Master?

He has made you and established you.”

The classic Aramaic translator of the Torah—Onkeles—translates the first part of this verse: “you disgraceful,

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unwise people” in a rather bizarre fashion: “You are a nation that received the Torah and you are unwise.”

### **Making the Transition from Disgraceful to Receiving the Torah**

Commentators are puzzled at the seemingly far-fetched way Onkeles translates the Hebrew word *naval*, which means disgraceful, as “a nation that received the Torah.” How does one make the transition from “disgraceful” to receiving the Torah? Is there anything that is disgraceful about receiving the Torah, G-d forbid?

The simple way of clarifying this enigmatic translation is to view it as a statement of bewilderment. You are a disgraceful nation because in spite of the fact that you received the Torah you are unwise. Indeed, there can be no greater disgrace to the Torah when notwithstanding the fact that one has received it and yet does not have the brains or decency to follow it.

There is a humorous self-critical barb that Jewish people have hurled at themselves that reflects the above: “We are such a smart people, if only we had a little *seichel*-intelligence...”

A Jewish person who has Torah knowledge but doesn't really “get it” is akin to one who is in possession of great

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wealth but lives as a beggar, or to the person who possesses an antique worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and sells it for a few cents.

This simple way of understanding the translation of Onkeles is consistent with the Chassidic approach:

### Today's Torah Vanity?

The Maggid of Mezritch—the successor of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement—explains that the term “*naval*”, which has been translated here as “disgraceful” is actually related to the statement in the Midrash that “the residue [*novlos*] of the wisdom above is Torah.”

In other words, the Torah that we received and we perceive is merely a reduced and external level of Torah. Torah's true essence remains distant, elusive and removed from our comprehension.

Only in the Messianic age, will Moshiach reveal to us the most hidden dimension of Torah. As the Midrash states that the Torah that we study today is regarded as “*hevel*-vanity” compared to the Torah that we will study in the future. And even though that essence of Torah is unfathomable for us now, we must realize that there such a level of Torah exists and is its true essence.

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Thus, anytime we ascribe limited value to Torah and recognize only its residual, external and marginal value, we are actually disgracing it. We are stripping it from its inner core and retaining only its outer shell.

When we view Torah as a beautiful piece of literature—which it certainly is—but not more, we have disgraced the Torah.

When we view Torah as a spiritual guide to life—which it certainly is—but no more than that, we have denigrated the Torah.

When we view the Torah as a G-d given source of knowledge—which it certainly is—but no more, we have essentially devalued the Torah.

Torah is all of the above and much more. All of the qualities that we ascribe to Torah represent merely its outer shell and not its inner essence. The inner essence of Torah is that it is G-d's wisdom, inseparable from G-d Himself.

We can now understand the meaning of Onkeles' words, "You are a nation that received the Torah and you are unwise."

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### Don't Underestimate the Value of Torah

Moses faults the Jewish nation for underestimating the true value of Torah; for reducing the Torah to some humanly conceivable knowledge. How can it be, Moses wonders, G-d gives us the most exquisite gift, and we fail to acknowledge its inestimable value.

One can take this approach a step further. The text states “a disgraceful nation.” Not only do we disgrace the Torah by underestimating its value; we even underestimate and disgrace ourselves.

Chassidic thought teaches us that our G-dly souls are rooted in an even “higher” place than the source of the Torah. Indeed, in this week's parsha—just a few verses later—the Torah states who we are: “For His nation is a part of G-d.” Our soul is one with G-d and reflects an even more infinite aspect of G-d's reality than Torah. In addition to the many ways we frequently deny our revealed qualities and virtues, we also are unaware of and therefore minimize or even deny our own hidden and most essential qualities.

### The Message

The message of this week's parsha to us is thus:

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Let's not sell ourselves short. We must recognize who we truly are and appreciate the true value of the gift G-d has given us.

### **Brutally Honest with Ourselves**

This week's parsha is read either the Shabbos before Yom Kippur or the Shabbos after. The confluence of these two events points to a thematic association between them.

What is the connection of this verse to Yom Kippur?

When we come before G-d to ask Him for forgiveness we must approach this request with a paradoxical mindset.

On the one hand, we have to be brutally honest, and not try to gloss over our faults and transgressions. While finding mitigating circumstances and giving one the benefit of the doubt is commendable when judging others, it is the wrong approach when engaging in self-examination and repentance. We must not say to G-d, "I transgressed, but..." We must take full responsibility for all of our actions.

On the other hand, we must also know our qualities. We must realize that we possess pure, pristine and holy souls that can never be corrupted even by the worst of sins. We are royalty and we therefore can afford to be honest about our shortcomings. Only the president can assume full

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responsibility for his mistakes and state: "The buck stops here."

This then is the Torah's message for Yom Kippur:

By all means, we must recognize where we went wrong. We must confess our sins. We must acknowledge that we have behaved disgracefully. But, simultaneously, we must realize that the reason we have acted that way is because we have forgotten who we really are; that we possess the purist and holiest of souls. And when we realize who we are and how intimate a relationship we have with G-d, we are on the road to complete return and atonement.

As important as it is to know our own capabilities, we must recognize that as we get closer to the Messianic Age our hidden qualities have come and are continuing to come closer to the surface.

As we stand on the very threshold of the Final Redemption, we should to suppress the heightened feelings we are capable as a result of our proximity to the Messianic Age.

May we all be sealed for a good and sweet year and a year of Redemption!

## ESSAY ELEVEN

# A TALE OF TWO HUMILITIES

There are two types of leaders.

The first sees the outer trappings of power and becomes intoxicated and blinded by this newly found power.

The second acquire a greater awareness of G-d in Whose presence they feel their own insignificance.

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## ESSAY ELEVEN

### A TALE OF TWO HUMILITIES

#### Name Change

This week's parsha, Ha'azinu, highlights the unusual song that Moses spoke/sang to the children of Israel. At the end of this week's parsha, the Torah states, "Moses came and spoke all the words of this song into the ears of the people, he and Hoshe'a the son of Nun." This Hoshe'a, of course, is none other than Yehoshua, or Joshua, who was to become Moses' successor.

Rashi notes that the Torah refers to him here with his original name of Hoshe'a and not Yehoshua, the name Moses gave him when he was sent to scout the Land of Cana'an. Rashi explains that this name change was to indicate that despite the fact he was accorded such honor—as to appear jointly with Moses as the Jewish leader—he retained his original humble character, as humble as he was initially (before his name was changed by Moses).

## Becoming Small

*Arugat Habosem* offers an insight into Joshua's humility based on an analysis of humility in the seminal Chassidic work, the Tanya, authored by R. Schneur Zalman (known as the Alter Rebbe), which comments on the words of the Patriarch Jacob: "I have become small from all the favors and from all [the truth]."

These words were uttered by Jacob as an introduction to his plea to G-d that He save him from Esau. Although G-d had previously assured him that He would accompany and protect him wherever he went, Jacob nonetheless feared that all the kindnesses that G-d had already shown him had made him "small." According to Rashi his concern was that his merits were diminished because of G-d's favors already bestowed upon him.

The Alter Rebbe offers a deeper insight into Jacob's fear. He explains that it was the kindness showered upon him by G-d that made him feel "small," because, as the Alter Rebbe explains, "With every single favor that G-d bestows upon a man, he ought to become very humble."

The rationale for this is further explained:

"Every Divine act of *Chesed*/kindness brings a man closer to G-d. And whoever is [brought] exceedingly close to G-d, being raised aloft to great heights, ought to be ever more humble, to the lowliest plane, as it is written, 'From afar

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has G-d appeared to' me.'" And, as is known, "All that are before *Him* are esteemed as nothing." Hence, whoever is more "before Him" — whoever is closer to G-d — is that much more like nothing, naught, and non-existent."

*Arugat Habosem* applies this to Joshua as well. When Joshua was elevated to the position of leadership and stood shoulder to shoulder with Moses it generated even greater humility in him.

### Two Models of Leadership

This explanation begs for clarification. When a person attains a high position and acquires power their egos are also stroked. Even otherwise decent and modest people are likely to become arrogant, condescending, and in many cases ruthless and dictatorial. As the saying goes, "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." How is it that Joshua's ascension to his august position of leadership and power had the opposite effect?

The simple answer is that there are two types of leaders. The first is one that sees the outer trappings of power and becomes intoxicated and blinded by this newly found power. The second model of leadership is one where they acquire a greater awareness of G-d in Whose presence they feel their own insignificance.

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Joshua, upon his promotion to the position of leadership, experienced Divine inspiration and energy. Added to that was the fact that he stood together with Moses who, more than any other human being, had a close relationship with G-d Who would speak to him “face to face.” Just being in Moses’ presence compelled you to feel G-d’s presence and to feel utterly humbled by the experience. Rather than allowing his new position of power to make him arrogant it had the opposite effect.

### **The Season of Humility**

We always read this parsha of Ha’azinu in close proximity to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. (In some years it is read after Yom Kippur; in others, as is the case this year, it is read between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur). There must be some connection between the theme of Joshua’s humility upon assuming leadership of the Jewish people and the theme of Rosh Hashanah.

Rosh Hashanah is when we feel G-d’s closeness. Rosh Hashanah means the “head” of the year because the head is the seat of our intellect. And on Rosh Hashanah our soul’s spiritual intellectual power is at its peak. On this day we are in a heightened state of G-dly awareness. Our Sages have applied the verse “seek Him when He is near” to the Ten Days of Repentance from Rosh Hashanah through Yom

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Kippur. It is during this period of enhanced G-dly awareness that we also feel humbled. This spirit of humility is a theme that runs through many of the special prayers recited during this period.

### Two Models

Humility can derive from two sources: The first is a humility which occurs as a product of a lack of self-esteem. The second, and much more desirable, form of humility, however, arises from an acute awareness of G-d's presence in our lives.

The practical difference between these two forms of humility is that when it is a product of low self-esteem it does not motivate one to action; it usually immobilizes the person and causes him or her to retreat from action and involvement with others. This debilitating form of humility is either a symptom of depression or can lead to it.

By contrast, the humility that comes from attaining a heightened awareness of G-d spurs the individual on to action. It is a powerful motivating force. It becomes the driving force to make the world one that is in consonance with G-d's plan.

A second salient difference between the two forms of humility is that in the low-self-esteem form the individual

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finds it very difficult to relate to other individuals or even to be in their presence. The spiritual reason for this is that the person suffering from low self-esteem is not in touch with his or her soul, which is truly a part of G-d.

Again, by contrast, in the latter model, humility actually motivates the person to want to connect with other people. This sophisticated form of humility inspires the person to respect and connect to the Divine character of the other and to learn from them how to get even closer to G-d.

When Joshua was appointed by G-d to the greatest leadership position—second only to Moses—he was overwhelmed by the G-dly energy that surrounded him, thus leading him to become exceedingly humble.

### **Humble and Assertive**

One could still ask the question, how Joshua's humility could be reconciled with G-d's command to him to be strong and not be submissive to anyone?

The truth is that true humility is entirely consistent with assertiveness when it comes to matters of principle. While a humble person will always defer to the needs and wants of others, compromise and sacrifice his/her own interests for the sake of others, he or she will never compromise on matters of principle.

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The rationale behind this is simple: when people are humble because of the knowledge and the **constant awareness** that all of their virtues and accomplishments are a gift from G-d, they are not asserting their own agendas, but G-d's. And while they loathe power—unlike tyrants who are assertive because they believe in, crave, and cherish their ability to control others—they feel a commitment to lead their people. When, however, a person is meek and self-doubting he or she will never feel confident enough to take a position.

### Moshiach's Humility

We can now also understand why one of the characteristics Moshiach must possess is humility. Moshiach, who will lead us out of exile into the final Redemption, cannot be someone who leads because of his personal power. Moshiach, as the last of a long line of Jewish leaders beginning with Moses and Joshua, is one who is so imbued with an awareness of G-d that he is utterly humble. And it is precisely his humility that empowers him to lead and to change the world precisely because he realizes that it is not his own power but G-d's. He can therefore be assertive without compromising his humility. On the contrary, his assertiveness is an outgrowth of his humility.

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Moshiach does not change the world in a vacuum. Moshiach's role as the ultimate human leader is to ignite the spark of Moshiach in each of us. This means that we too endeavor to develop a healthy form of humility, not the humility that exudes meekness and weakness where we are reluctant to stand up for our values and national interests, but, rather, the assertive humility that derives from our awareness of G-d. Conversely, when we work on cultivating that humility we empower Moshiach to realize his potential.

### The Time of Your Redemption has Arrived

With this premise we can understand why when the Midrash describes the scenario of the coming of Moshiach, it tell us that Moshiach will make the following declaration to the Jewish people: **“Humble ones**, the time of your redemption has arrived.”

Why does Moshiach address the Jewish people as “humble ones” and not “righteous ones” or some other similar expression?

The answer is that it is the sophisticated form of humility that empowers Moshiach to make that very declaration. Through our humility that is borne out of the study of Torah—specifically, the teachings of Chassidus that focus on the presence of G-d in our lives—we awaken the

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potential of Moshiach to assert his G-d given role to liberate the Jewish people from exile and to usher in the age of true and permanent peace.

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# **ESSAY TWELVE**

## **IN YOUR FACE!**

When we study Torah, and see it as the Divine wisdom it is, and not simply as an interesting collection of stories, or even a profound philosophical system, we connect to the inner dimension of G-d's wisdom.

That connection does not allow us to forget.

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## ESSAY TWELVE

### IN YOUR FACE!

#### **Torah is Not Empty!**

Moses continues with his admonition of the Jewish people in his last days on earth. In this week's parsha, after reciting a long song, Moses continues to focus on the proper attitude toward Torah.

Moses says to them:

“For it is not an empty thing from you. Rather, it is your life, and from this matter shall you prolong your days on the land to which you cross the Jordan, to take possession over it.”

What did Moses mean when he says, “it is not empty?”

Rashi comments on these words and states:

“You have nothing empty in the Torah that if you would expound it that it would not have in it reward.

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In other words, there is nothing in the Torah that does not have meaning for us.

The Jerusalem Talmud adds, "If you find any part of Torah to be empty it is from you." In other words, if we find the Torah wanting, it is we who are wanting; it is we who are empty.

Rashi then proves this point by citing a verse which appears to contain irrelevant information. After we probe beneath the surface, however, we can discover the powerful message it contains.

### **Eliphaz' Concubine: A Spiritual Message?**

The verse he cites is in the Book of Genesis, where the Torah mentions that Esau's son Eliphaz took Timna as his concubine and that Timna was a sister of Lotan.

What possible value can this information have for us?

Rashi answers that Lotan was a distinguished leader of his people and it is therefore puzzling that he would have let his sister become a concubine.

It turned out that, on the contrary, she was deeply honored that she could become closely attached to any descendant

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of Abraham. She said, "I am not worthy to be a wife to him. If only I could become his concubine!"

This information is important, Rashi explains, because it "publicizes the praise of Abraham, that rulers and kings would desire to cleave to his seed."

The question can be asked, why Rashi had to bring this particular example of Timna to illustrate that everything mentioned in the Torah has meaning. There are so many other verses before and after the one about Timna that appear prosaic but convey profound lessons.

### **Menasheh's Problem with the Verse of Timna**

We can shed light on this matter by referring to an enigmatic passage in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 99b) concerning the Biblical king Menasheh, son of the righteous King Chizkiyahu.

Menasheh, one of the most evil of kings, a mass murderer and idolater, mocked the Torah.

The Talmud relates that Menasheh would cite the verses concerning Timna and mockingly say:

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“Did Moses have nothing to write other than ‘Lotan’s sister was Timna’ and ‘Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz’?”

Why was Menasheh so fixated on this particular verse?

### A Double-Edged Sword

The answer lies in the name Menasheh itself.

Joseph named his first born Menasheh because he said, “G-d made me forget my travail and my father’s house.” In that context, Menasheh was a positive name which implied forgetting the negative experiences of the past. Keeping troubling memories in the fore of our mind can be depressing and debilitating.

However, forgetfulness is not always selective. Some people allow their penchant for forgetfulness to apply to their faith and commitment to Judaism.

According to the Talmud (Sanhedrim 102b) King Menasheh’s “amnesia” was not only selective, but in the wrong direction. “Why was he called Menasheh?” the Talmud asks, “Because he forgot G-d.”

Where does the negative power of forgetfulness come from?

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According to the Kabbalists and Chassidic thought, it derives from the “backside of wisdom.”

In simple terms, this means that our minds are biased toward the superficial and secondary aspects of knowledge. This attitude toward knowledge causes us to forget the important things in life, which are connected to the “face of wisdom,” representing the true and inner core of knowledge.

By analogy, the human body illustrates the difference between the face of wisdom and its backside.

Our bodies have a face and a backside. The face contains all of the important features that enable us to express ourselves clearly. If we show someone our face that person can get an inner glimpse into who we are and what we are feeling. Our backside, by contrast, doesn't have any power to reveal our inner feelings; it conceals them.

Similarly, Divine wisdom has a “face” and a “backside.” The face of wisdom is the Torah, which clearly reveals G-d's wisdom and inner will. All other systems of knowledge, while they must have been created by G-d and contain hidden sparks of holiness, do not reflect Divine wisdom.

Torah also has a face and a backside. When we study Torah, and see it as the Divine wisdom it is, and not simply

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as an interesting collection of stories, or even a profound philosophical system, we connect to the inner dimension of G-d's wisdom. That connection does not allow us to forget.

If, however, Torah is regarded by us as just another, albeit important, contribution to knowledge, we open ourselves up to the negative Menasheh syndrome.

### **King David's Error**

Moreover, even when we understand that the Torah is Divine and unique, we can still relate to Torah's backside instead of its face. The Alter Rebbe in his classic work, the Tanya, discusses the mistake that King David made when he described Torah as a song. For King David, Torah was so powerful a song that he was able to distract himself from all his sorrows; he realized the beauty and power of Torah's melody. Our Sages tell us that because he "denigrated" the Torah by reducing it to a beautiful song, he was punished and forgot a law that forbade carrying the Ark on a wagon.

King David's error was his praising of the Torah with a secondary praise, thereby obscuring the face of Torah as something utterly Divine and eluding any characterization, no matter how sublime.

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This is why King David's punishment was forgetting a Torah law. The punishment reflected the nature of his error. He relegated the Torah to a secondary level; he was therefore punished with the forgetfulness that results from the backside of wisdom.

Obviously, there are many levels to the backside of Torah. At the highest level, it is to regard Torah as the most powerful force *in the universe*. That was King David's mistake - Torah *transcends the universe*.

At a lower level, the backside of Torah encourages one to regard Torah as no more than an equal partner with other systems of knowledge.

### **Lotan's Sister: The Backside of Wisdom**

The Chassidic work, Panim Yafos, discovers a hidden message in the Torah's statement that Timna was Lotan's sister:

Panim Yafos demonstrates that the name Lotan alludes to the backside of wisdom:

If we take the Hebrew word for wisdom, *chochma*, and transpose its letters with the letters that follow them in the alphabet, it yields the word Lotan. The letters that are

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closer to the beginning of the alphabet are the face; the letters that follow are therefore the backside of chochma. Moreover, the word "sister" also alludes to wisdom as it says, "Say to wisdom you are my sister."

Timna wanted to rectify and elevate the status of secular wisdom by connecting herself to Abraham's family. She realized that his grandson, Jacob, had the power to rectify and refine the hind part of wisdom, but he did not fully accept her. As a result, she was content to become a concubine of Esau's son Eliphaz, who was known for his wisdom as one of Job's friends and counsellors. However, because her connection to Jacob's family was tenuous, and she was merely a concubine, this wisdom did not get refined. Instead she produced a child named Amalek, the infamous father of the evil nation that sows doubts and causes forgetfulness.

Eliphaz, although sent by his father Esau to kill Jacob, instead robbed him of his possessions. When wisdom was compromised as a result of Jacob not allowing Timna to marry into his family and become rectified thereby, it impoverished Jacob.

Jacob also suffered years later when he was attacked by Esau's guardian angel and suffered the dislocation of his sciatic nerve. This nerve in Hebrew is referred to as the Gid Hanasheh.

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Panim Yafos points out that the root of the word Nasheh is similar to Menasheh which means forgetfulness. This attack, and Eliphaz' impoverishment of Jacob, resulted from the failure to refine the backside of wisdom, which, ultimately led to the emergence of an evil monarch, Menasheh, whose very name, as we have learned, epitomized forgetting G-d and His teachings.

Menasheh did not like the connotation of this verse because it exposed him as evil and identified his glaring flaw of forgetfulness.

### **Tisha B'Av**

There are 365 days in a solar year and there are 365 Biblical proscriptive commandants; the things that we are commanded not to do. According to the Arizal, the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve, one of the 365 commandments, corresponds to Tisha B'av, the day that both Holy Temples were destroyed and we were plunged into cruel exile.

This shows us that the idea of forgetfulness is the root cause of exile. It is no surprise that we are taught in the Talmud that one of Menasheh's sins was the murder of his

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grandfather, the prophet Isaiah, who was the prophet of consolation and Redemption.

Menasheh's lethal antipathy to Isaiah symbolized the utter disconnect between Redemption and Menasheh-forgetfulness.

It follows that if Galus-exile is a product of and contributes to forgetfulness, then remembrance is the antidote.

Indeed, many of the Torah's commandments revolve around the theme of remembrance. We are commanded to remember the Exodus and the giving of the Torah every day, in two of the "Six Remembrances" that we recite daily. There are many other Mitzvos which are designed to jog our soul's memories.

But remembrance is not just the opposite of forgetting. As we have seen remembrance means that we are connected to the "face" of G-d's wisdom. And when we are in His face, we experience G-d's unmasked Essence. This is the Essence of Redemption.

## ESSAY THIRTEEN

# THREE GENERATIONS-THREE DIMENSIONS

All areas of Torah knowledge are Divine.

They nevertheless differ in the way they reflect the Divine.

When one studies criminal law the mind is engaged with criminal behavior. We need to be reminded periodically that we are studying G-d's wisdom.

Chassidic thought, which describes the relationship between G-d, us, our soul, the Mitzvos and our mission in this world, is unambiguously Divine.

**LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE - PARSHAS HA'AZINU-SHABBOS  
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## ESSAY THIRTEEN

### THREE GENERATIONS-THREE DIMENSIONS

#### Eternal Guarantee

“Ask your father and he will relate it to you, and your elders and they will tell you. When the Supreme One gave the nations their inheritance...”

Ba'al Haturim commented on the juxtaposition of the verse about asking your father and elders with the verse that speaks of an inheritance.

In his inimitable style, the Ba'al Haturim (in a commentary that focuses on Torah hints) says that this alludes to the statement in the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 85a):

“If someone is a Torah scholar and his son is a Torah scholar and his son's son is a Torah scholar the Torah will not cease from his offspring forever, as it says, ‘And as for Me, this is My covenant... shall not be withdrawn from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of

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your offspring's offspring,' said G-d, 'from this moment and forever.'"

This verse in our Parsha, Ba'al Haturim notes, also refers to three generations of Torah study, Your elders, your father and yourself. The very next verse speaks of an eternal inheritance, alluding to the idea that three consecutive generations of Torah study guarantee the continuity of Torah study in that family.

### Contradiction?

This statement needs to be reconciled with a statement in Ethics of the Fathers (2:17): "Apply yourself to study Torah because it is **not** yours by inheritance.

Maharsha notes this apparent contradiction and resolves it by qualifying the Talmudic statement. The Talmud does not suggest that Torah will remain with that family forever without effort on their part to study Torah. Rather, the comparison to an inheritance is meant to suggest that with personal effort, the caliber of Torah will remain on the high level of the first three generations.

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### Three Generations: Three Aspects of Torah

Using homiletic license we may interpret the three generations metaphorically as a representation of three levels of Torah knowledge. The word for generation in Hebrew is *dor*, which can also be rendered “row,” which can also convey the meaning of a level.

We can now reinterpret the teaching of our Sages: When we possess three rows-levels of Torah knowledge we are guaranteed that the Torah will never depart from us.

What three levels can be meant?

### Fasting to Forget

To understand these three rows/levels/aspects of Torah we must first consider the continuation of the Talmudic passage.

Immediately following Rabbi Yochanan's statement, the Talmud relates how Rabbi Yosef fasted several series of 100 (in some versions: 40) fast days to achieve the promise of Torah remaining in his family. Once he succeeded in getting a promise covering three generations he said he no longer needed to continue to fast for the future beyond

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those three generations because the Torah had already given its promise that it would never depart.

Immediately after this, the Talmud relates how Rabbi Zeira also fasted 100 (or 40) days to forget the Babylonian Talmud when he decided to relocate to Israel and study the Jerusalem Talmud. He did not want the inferior style of logic of the Babylonian Sages to cloud his ability to comprehend the more abstract learning that characterized the Sages in Israel.

On the surface these two stories of rabbinic fasting have nothing in common other than the fact that they fasted 100 (or 40) days to achieve a certain goal.

However, in light of the fact that every word in the Talmud is precise in its meaning and placement, the juxtaposition of these two fasting incidents suggests that there is also a thematic connection between them.

The reason Rabbi Zeria fasted, as mentioned, was predicated on the notion that Torah comprises multiple levels.

## All Given at Sinai

To understand this concept we must review a fundamental Jewish belief that all parts of Torah, which include all of Jewish knowledge based on the Torah, are equally Divine. Indeed, the Talmud states, “[Even] all the novel insights of a worthy student [which shed light on any other part of Torah] were given by G-d at Mount Sinai.”

So while all areas of Torah knowledge are Divine, they nevertheless differ in the way they reflect the Divine. For example, when one studies criminal law the mind is engaged with criminal behavior. Now, while these teachings constitute G-d's wisdom and His will, and as Maimonides writes, “He and His wisdom are one,” the nature of the subject matter obscures its Divine character. We need to be reminded periodically that we are studying G-d's wisdom.

Let's now contrast the study of criminal law with the study of Jewish mysticism, particularly Chassidic thought, which describes the relationship between G-d, us, our soul, the Mitzvos and our mission in this world plus many allied topics. These teachings are unambiguously Divine. They not only have a Divine origin but their subject is unabashedly about the Divine.

To determine the nature of any work we must examine three aspects: Its author, its content and its methodology.

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All parts of Torah share the same Divine Author but they do not necessarily express that origin equally nor do they share the same overt Divine content or methodology.

### **Difference between Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud**

Within Jewish law—the primary subject matter of both Talmuds—there is a divergence of methodology, which reflects a difference in the way G-d's light is channeled through these Divine teachings.

As discussed in the preceding essay (Parsha Vayeilech), the Babylonian Talmud's methodology is to “bombard” the student with questions. When a Sage answers the question he is met with a counter question, which may even continue for several pages. In addition, the Talmud is full of arguments and lively debates.

In the Talmud, G-d's will and wisdom can be clouded by all the questions and debates. The Divine character of the law is less obscured in the Jerusalem Talmud, where those elements of questions and debates are mostly absent.

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### **Jewish Mysticism and Chassidus**

Within the teachings of Torah, Mysticism, particularly Chassidus, is the most dramatic expression of the Divine because all three elements of the Divine are present:

Origin: Mysticism, like all matters of Torah, derives from G-d and was given at Mount Sinai. However, the preeminence of this part of Torah is that it is quite obvious that this knowledge could not have originated in a human mind. How could a human being determine how many G-dly attributes there are, or the nature of our soul, or the hierarchy of spiritual worlds that connect G-d's essence to our physical world, or the process of *tzimtzum*, where G-d contracts Himself etc., etc. These teachings had to be revealed to the Kabbalists and masters by Divine revelation and passed down from one mystic to another.

Content: Unlike, most matters of Torah, these teachings are overtly about G-d and spirituality.

Methodology: Owing to the spiritual nature of these mystical teachings, they are presented in a more abstract, ethereal or other-worldly approach. One who studies these subjects may feel transported to another intellectual/spiritual realm.

### **The Intermediary**

Between every extreme there are intermediary levels. It may be suggested that the intermediary between the Babylonian Talmud (in which its Divine origin, content and methodology are greatly obscured), and the teachings of Chassidus (where one comes face to face with Divinity on all three counts) is the Jerusalem Talmud, where, at least, the approach is more abstract and hence less filtered and constrained in its Divine character.

Hence when Rabbi Zeira wanted to graduate from the Babylonian style to the Jerusalem style he had to undergo a transformation to be receptive to a higher, more overt, expression of the Divine within Torah.

### **Fasting to Achieve Higher Levels of Torah**

We can now understand why Rabbi Yosef fasted an equal number of fasts as Rabbi Zeira did to warrant the promise of three generations of Torah scholars.

In light of our novel translation of “generation” as “row, level or aspect of Torah,” we can now understand the meaning of three aspects of Torah and why it would take great effort and sacrifice to achieve those three levels.

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These three levels, as mentioned, are the awareness of the Divine origin of Torah, its Divine content and a more abstract approach.

It may be suggested that Rabbi Yosef was endeavoring to reach the most sublime level of Torah knowledge, which is contained in its inner mystical dimension. Upon reaching the top he knew that Torah would not depart from him because the level of Torah he had accessed could not degenerate or be compromised.

When we study the inner dimension of Torah we master all three “generations” (read: aspects) of Torah. This mastery opens a window for us to see its most unadulterated, unfiltered and infinite aspect, reflective of the most unadulterated, unfiltered and infinite aspect of G-d. In this area of study, no cover or screen dims the radiance of the Torah as can be true of other parts of Torah which filter these three components to one degree or another.

### **Blessing on the Torah**

This understanding of the three aspects of Torah is reflected in the blessing we must recite before learning Torah, the source of which is found in this week's parsha.

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First, in these blessings we make reference to the Divine origin of the Torah. In fact, we mention that the giving of the Torah to us from G-d is a continuous process. We therefore use the expression “Who **gives** us the Torah” and not “who **gave** us the Torah.”

Second, we speak of learning Torah as the equivalent of “knowing G-d’s name.” This reflects the Divine content of Torah. As the Zohar says, G-d’s name, His imprimatur is on every page and in every word of Torah.

Third, these blessings also speak of the “sweetness” of Torah. This reflects Torah methodology which makes it sweet and delightful to study. One can struggle to navigate Torah’s winding paths. We therefore ask G-d to provide us with a sweet methodology and approach to learning.

To be sure, **all** parts of Torah possess these three components, but as stated they are most pronounced in the Chassidic teachings, which help to illuminate all the other parts of Torah so that they too should reflect all three aspects of the Divine.

### Three Generations of Moshiach

It may also be suggested that these three generations are hinted at in an enigmatic statement of the Talmud

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(*Sanhedrin* 99a) that there are three generations associated with Moshiach.

One way of explaining that statement is that Moshiach will reveal the deepest aspects of Torah, the sampling of which we enjoy today when we study the inner dimension of Torah, specifically the teachings of Chassidus.

Moshiach is not only a leader who will usher in an age of peace and rebuild the Bais Hamikdash (although Dayenu!). Moshiach is also a master teacher through whom these three aspects of Torah will reach their zenith.

Moshiach's teaching will illuminate the Torah's origin so that when we study it we will feel the continuous flow of Torah from G-d to us in its every word.

Moshiach will reveal the most esoteric and sublime G-dly knowledge.

Moshiach will transform us with the unprecedented sweetness and sheer heavenly delight in the Torah that he will teach us.