



# The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

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## Vision of Peace: Over Idealization and Under Realization

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered June 12, 1976)

**T**he priestly blessings conclude on the theme of peace: וישם לך שלום, “and may He grant you peace.” The Rabbis cherished this blessing above all others, and referred to it as כלי מחזיק ברכה, the vessel which contains all blessings. All the previous blessings require peace as the context in which they can be effective and meaningful.

Exactly what does this “peace” refer to? The Sifre gives us two alternative definitions. R. R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim says: שלום בביתך, peace in your home. R. Nathan teaches: זה שלום מלכות בית דוד, it refers to the peace of the Kingdom of the House of David. The difference is that R. Hanina defines peace as domestic tranquility, whereas R. Nathan gives it a political-national definition, the peace of the realm.

What is surprising is that of these two possible interpretations, it is R. Hanina who teaches domestic peace. After all, it is the same R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim who tells us, in a celebrated passage in Avot, הוי מתפלל, בשלומה של מלכות, “Pray for the peace of the realm, for if not for the fear of authority people would swallow each other alive.” Why, then, in the blessings of the priests, does he suddenly turn inward and interpret the concluding blessing as domestic peace, leaving it to someone else – R. Nathan – to emphasize the political aspects of peace?

Perhaps the answer is something we shall all have to learn, painful though it is.

Most of us have been reared on a noble vision: peace for all the world and in our own times. Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and every American president since then, have preached and strived for this vision. It is one of the most beautiful and inspiring themes to capture the imagination of mankind.

Of course, it is not new. It stems from, and is a secularized version of, the great visions of the prophets

of Israel – of Isaiah and Amos and Micah. It is they who taught that, “and the wolf shall lie down with the lamb...,” and “they shall beat their swords into plough shares...,” and “nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

The only difference is this: the prophets recognized that these are Messianic dreams, that they will be realized only with the advent of the Messiah. Isaiah, in Chapter Two, introduces his vision with the words of וזהו באחרית הימים, “And it shall be at the end of days.” We must not expect the fulfillment of these uplifting visions until the days of the Messiah.

The secularized version, however, is not Messianic but Utopian. It is a modern phenomenon, the painting of an ideal world which is within the grasp of man. It teaches that we can, with the means available to us, create the perfect society, one of universal peace and justice for all men. The Messianic vision is one which sets an unrealizable goal, and inspires us to approximate it as best we can. But it knows that we cannot do so fully right now. The Utopian dream is one which inspires us with impatience and drives us to expect realization here and now.

Most of us, who are passionately devoted to the cause of peace, have assumed without further reflection that it is indeed possible to achieve peace universally “in our times.” We are, hence, more Utopian than Messianic. Since the advent of the Atomic Age, this has become a working hypothesis of international relations, something which is accepted beyond doubt. Indeed, consider the alternative – all of civilization reduced to a fine atomic ash! Hence, universal peace is not only a distant goal but an immediate necessity.

And yet – how frustrating! – how many wars have been fought, and how much blood has been shed, since Hiroshima and Nagasaki!

What R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim is telling us is this: dream the dreams of Isaiah, of nation not lifting up sword against nation; pray for the peace of the realm; but don't be unrealistic. Strive for these always – but without illusions as to their viability and applicability and realizability in the present or the immediate future.

Insofar as now is concerned, here we must turn to the blessings of the priests. It is they who refer to that aspect of the good life which can be attained and is within our grasp. The blessing of peace in the priestly blessings speaks of a peace which is much more realistic and attainable: שלום בביתך, peace in your homes. First you must strive for peace in your own home, between husband and wife, between parents and children, between brother and sister. Then you can strive for the larger aspects of peace – political, social, international – which will find their full realization at the end of days, the days of Messiah.

Not only Jewish tradition, but Jewish historical experience as well, teaches us never to over-anticipate the “end of days,” the eschatological age, the days of Messiah. Judaism teaches us to beware of the fallacy of thinking that the visions of the future are all at hand, just around the bend. This is the great Utopian fallacy. There is a process of auto-suggestion and self-hypnosis at work: the facile illusion that turns Utopian dreams into supposed realities, only to disappoint and frustrate us and sow the seeds of disaster.

Jews who have come to Utopianism via a secularized Messianism seem particularly vulnerable to this fallacy, to this illusion. Moreover, many of our fellow Jews combine this Utopian fallacy with yet another element: a highly idealistic readiness to offer great sacrifices on behalf of the visions which are all but realized – and especially are they willing to sacrifice for universal peace such elements as Jews, Judaism, and the State of Israel!

This is especially true of those deracinated Jews, both of the Right and of the Left, who have almost no Jewish affiliation or Jewish identity, and yet when it comes to Israel, express their dovishness by using that patronizing first-person-plural: “we” ought to be “magnanimous” by returning to the Arabs all they wish without any compensation. “We” ought to give up land and security, and perhaps our very existence, for the sake of “peace.” As if Israel's suicide, Heaven forbid, will bring shalom to the world. Proof of the falsehood of this contention is – Lebanon ... Some peace! Some Utopia!

This holds true not only for Israel, but for Jewish

interests in this country as well. I refer specifically to the Jewish situation in our own community, something for which you and I share a collective guilt. For too long have we ignored our interests and have had our attention distracted elsewhere. As a result, we have allowed special interest groups to undermine and erode the Jewish commitment to and presence in the West Side of Manhattan.

We are rightly compassionate towards all minorities and especially low income groups. Yet, that does not mean that we must set out deliberately to destroy an excellent neighborhood and de-Judaize it by sending our Jews fleeing to the suburbs. Does turning all the West Side into a slum contribute to universal justice? There are events that happen in this neighborhood that, paradoxically, were advocated as acts of social justice towards lower class people, and resulted in disadvantaging them economically. Businesses were chased out of the neighborhood, and both we and they were the losers – only some rabble-rousing politicians stood to gain.

Yet, I am told that when one official was approached and reminded of the Jewish interest in this community, his answer – whether innocent or not, I do not presume to know – was, “But what about our prophetic tradition?...” This – from a man who probably cannot name any three Jewish prophets – is supposed to be a reason why Jews must abandon the West Side of Manhattan, their homes and businesses and communal institutions ...

For too long have we preached this Utopianism, have we subscribed to this fallacy, have we permitted the confusion of peace and pacifism and of goodness and altruism.

Perhaps this distinction and this awareness – that the wholeness of peace and joy and plenty is reserved for the “end of days,” and not available at present – ought to serve not as a depressant but to encourage us. When we lower our over-idealized expectations, we become more realistic and less frustrated – and, in addition, we achieve greater peace in the world too.

A generation after the Holocaust is hardly the time to expect age-old beautiful visions to be fulfilled.

A generation after the Holocaust is hardly the time to ask Israel or Jews to oblige the world and disappear so as to bring it peace.

A generation after the Holocaust is the time when Jews need the present reality of Samson as much as the future visions of an Isaiah.

If we are Jewishly realistic, we will not grow impatient

because peace eludes us in the Middle East and in the world. We will learn to live with international tension – even as we live with personal tension if there is no alternative. We will not expect universal peace in our times, but will spare no effort to obtain as much peace as soon as possible.

What bothers me is not the absence of universal peace or the peace of the realm as much as the lack of שלום בית in the State of Israel itself. How can we entertain Isaiah's vision of the lamb lying down with the wolf, or R. Nathan's dream of the peace of the kingdom of the House of David in its relations with others, when we have not begun to attain R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim's blessing of שלום בביתך, domestic peace? How can we speak of peace in the world or in the Middle East, if the Prime Minister and

Defense Minister of Israel are not on talking terms? – if its two Chief Rabbis do not even greet each other? – if Israel's Ambassador to the U.N. and its Ambassador to the U.S.A. are at loggerheads?

Peace must be built from the bottom up, not from the top down.

So, we need visions – grand visions, holy visions, universal visions – and even if they cannot be realized at once, they still tell us in what direction we should be going and they exercise a “pull” on us.

But we need not only visions, but blessings. And the greatest of all blessings is: וישם לך שלום, may He bestow upon us peace, שלום בביתך, peace in our homes.

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## To Be a Blessing

*Dr. Erica Brown*

I was recently in a small store and overheard the clerk speaking Hebrew to a man at the register. The customer bought nothing. But then gave the clerk a lengthy blessing for long life, good health, happiness with his family, and financial success. I asked in Hebrew if this came with every purchase and how I could get this special blessing for myself. When the customer left, the clerk turned to me and said, “This man has lost everything and came to ask me for work. I try my best to help him.” When I asked about the blessing, he responded softly, “He is a cohen [a priest]. The only thing I could give him today was the opportunity to bless me so that he can help me.”

I felt tears welling up. This clerk understood how to equalize a relationship of charitable giver and receiver by giving this man a sense of dignity through the instrument of a blessing. It was a magnificently tender moment of grace, one that made me think about the power of giving a blessing. How wonderful it would be if every time we felt blessed, we blessed others. And here, this unfortunate man who did not feel blessed was, nevertheless, willing to bless someone else.

The exchange made me think of the scene in Genesis when Jacob encounters Pharaoh and gave him a blessing on the way in and the way out of Pharaoh's chambers (Gen 47:7-10). Jacob was a man broken. His homeland Canaan was in a crippling famine, but Jacob maintained his self-respect and self-worth by giving Pharaoh what he

did still have: the capacity to bless. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book *Celebrating Life* explains what this important impulse can do: “Making a blessing over life is the best way of turning life into a blessing.”

In fact, it is this that God commanded Abraham to do in the first act of revelation Abraham received: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse the one who curses you; And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (Gen. 12:2-3). God blessed Abraham with the expectation that Abraham would become a blessing, give his blessings to others, and establish a nation which would be a blessing to the world. God articulated an endgame; founding a nation is insufficient. Abraham and those who followed him would only succeed if he and they were regarded as a blessing by others. This was essential to his leadership. For Rabbi Sacks, giving a blessing and being a blessing was an important theme in his work. In “We Are What We Do Not Own” (Behar, Covenant & Conversation), he wrote, “In life, ask not ‘what can I gain?’ but ‘what can I give?’ Be a blessing to others and you will find that life has been a blessing to you.”

When we turn to our parsha, Naso, we find the blessing that the priests gave to Israel: “*God spoke to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus, shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:*

*God bless you and protect you!*

*God deal kindly and graciously with you!*

*God bestow [divine] favor upon you and grant you peace!*

*Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num. 6:22-27).*

Rabbi Yishmael, one of the great sages of the Talmud, reviewed one of the verses in this passage, “You shall bless the children of Israel.” He asked if the priests bless the people, who blesses the priests? To answer, he cited a verse later in the same chapter: “And they shall put My name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num. 6:27). He concludes from this verse that just as the priests bless Israel, does “the Holy One, Blessed be He, bless the priests” (BT Hullin 49a). Everyone deserves and needs to give and receive blessings.

Many parents give their children this very same blessing every Friday night. Blessing our children and grandchildren is one of the highlights of my week, almost a culmination of what all of the work of the week and the blessing of Shabbat is leading me to: blessing our children and helping them see the blessing they should be to others. Wherever we or our children are in the world, we try not to miss this special ritual that brings us together and also links us all the way back to this week’s Torah reading. Sometimes when I have guests for Shabbat who do not have this custom or do not know Hebrew, they say, “I wish we had this family custom.” My response is always the same, “Now’s a great time to start.” In person. On the phone. It may be awkward at first but as with any practice, it gets easier over time. And it only takes a few minutes.

## Who Is A Jew?

*Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l*

**R**av Yosef Dov Solovetichik, zt”l, once asked, when speaking in Boston on Tisha B’Av explaining the kinos, the elegies over the destruction of the Temple that are recited for many hours on that day, what the definition of a Jew is. He answered that a Jew is someone who, from time to time, has a rendezvous with God. He then went on to explicate the kinos and show how they describe how the existence of the Temple made it very easy for someone to have an encounter with God, and how its loss makes it that much harder. He likened our situation, without the Temple, to that of a father and son who are sitting in the same room and long to meet with each other,

Hebrew, English, Spanish, French – it doesn’t matter. It’s a Jewish language of love.

Priests are spiritual leaders. Parents are leaders in their families. There are leaders in corporate and non-profit life, in intellectual life, in politics, and in houses of worship. All need to be a blessing, to be blessed, and to give blessings. The Irish poet John O’Donohue (1956-2008) wrote of the blessings leaders need in his poem “For a Leader.” I want to share a few stanzas:

*May you have the grace and wisdom*

*To act kindly, learning*

*To distinguish between what is*

*Personal and what is not*

*May you be hospitable to criticism.*

*May you never put yourself at the centre of things.*

*May you act not from arrogance but out of service.*

*May you work on yourself...*

*May you learn to cultivate the art of presence*

*In order to engage with those who meet you.*

*When someone fails or disappoints you,*

*May the graciousness with which you engage*

*Be their stairway to renewal and refinement...*

*May you have good friends*

*To mirror your blind spots.*

*May leadership be for you*

*A true adventure of growth.*

**So, what’s the best blessing you have received?  
What’s the best blessing you’ve ever given?**

but a partition in the room prevents the encounter from occurring. Although prayer and Torah study are also avenues of meeting with God, it is still much harder to do so without a Temple in Jerusalem. That is the tragedy that we mourn over on Tisha B’Av, and the prayer that we offer in hopes of alleviating that state of affairs.

On another occasion, in a Chumash shiur that he delivered in New York, Rabbi Soloveitchik asked a different question. What, he asked, should the goal of a Jew be? He added, “don’t tell me it should be to become a Rosh Yeshiva! I wouldn’t recommend it!” What, then should the goal of a Jew be? He answered that the goal of a Jew should

be to become a prophet. Although he did not elaborate on his sources, I believe that he must have had the Rambam's elaborate discussion of the process of prophecy and its various stages in his *Moreh Nevuchim*, or *Guide for the Perplexed*, as well as his remarks in the introduction to his commentary on the *Mishneh*, in mind. Rambam says that there are two types of prophets, those who are sent as messengers to the people, and those who attain a certain level of closeness to God, but are not sent with a message to others (see *Meshech Chochmah* to *Bereishis* 18:13, for an interesting application of this distinction). Although Malachi was the last of the prophets in terms of messengers sent with a specific message, the kind of prophet which consists of achieving a certain level of personal development can still be achieved today. There is, in fact a discussion among Maimonides scholars of *The Guide* as to whether the Rambam himself felt that he had achieved a certain level of prophecy, because, in describing an early stage of prophecy, he seems to switch to the first person. However one wants to view that discussion, it seems that, according to the Rambam, a person is able, even today, to achieve some level of prophecy, and this is what Rav Soloveitchik said a Jew should strive for (for a fuller discussion of this topic and many additional sources, I would recommend the work of Rabbi Bezalel Naor, *Lights of Prophecy*).

With Rav Soloveitchik's comments in mind, we can better understand why we read the section on the laws of nazir in parshas Naso, which almost always is the parsha that is read after Shavuos. The Rambam, in his *Mishneh Torah*, tells us that at the revelation at Mt. Sinai the Jewish nation as whole achieved prophecy, and witnessed how God proclaimed the Torah to Moshe, and made him His messenger to the Jewish people in transmitting it (see *Pachad Yitzchok* to Shavuos by Rav Yitzchok Hutner for a fuller discussion of the Rambam's remarks). The Ramban, in his commentary to parshas Terumah, writes that the function of the mishkan and the encampment of the Jewish people around it was to transfer the experience of closeness to God that the people had at Mt. Sinai to their daily lives. As we explained in last week's message, this may be one of the reasons that we read parshas Bamidbar, in which the formation of the encampment is described, on the week before Shavuos. Perhaps, then, this is why we read about the nazir on the week after Shavuos. The nazir, for a period of thirty days, abstains from wine, avoids becoming defiled through contact with a corpse, and lets his hair grow. The

Torah, in the midst of enumerating these laws, seems to describe the nazir as being holy, as we read, "holy will he be" (*Bamidbar* 6:5). Moreover, the Ramban writes that the reason that a nazir brings a *korban chatas*, as a sin-offering, after completing his time in this state is that once he has achieved this level of holiness, and experienced the closeness to God that it entails, he should have continued in that state. Although not all commentaries agree with the Ramban's approach to the institution of nezirus, Rabbeinu Bachya cites his remarks, as does the *Sefer HaChinuch*. The Ramban, in his commentary, cites the verse in *Amos* (2:11) which is part of the haftarah to parshas Vayeishev, in which God says, "I established some of your sons as prophets, and some of your young men as nazirites," as a proof to his contention that the nazir is considered to be on a high spiritual plane. Rav Soloveitchik, in his shiur, also cited this verse, but used it to argue that being a nazir was actually an early stage in becoming a prophet. He set out to demonstrate that, just as we find, in the book of Shmuel, the notion of a school of prophets, so too was there a school for nazirs, because being a nazir was an earlier stage, or a training ground, for becoming a prophet.

Rabbi Moshe Isserles, known as the Rama, takes a different approach to the state of nazir, seeing it as a corrective measure for certain spiritual failings. When the Torah says "he will be holy," according to the Rama, it means that afterward he will be only, but only after he has completed his term of nazirus, not during it. The process of nazirus, for the Rama, will enable the nazir to restore his spiritual equilibrium and thereby become holy. Even according to this approach, however, we can understand why the section of nazir is read after Shavuos, since, at Mt. Sinai, the Jewish nation was given the charge to be kingdom of priests and a holy nation. While according to the Ramban, holiness is achieved during the process of nazirus, for the Rama, holiness comes only after completing the nazirus and returning to everyday life (see Rabbi Yissachar Jacobson's *Binah BeMikrah*, or *Meditations on the Torah*, for a fuller exposition of the two approaches). In either case, the stress on holiness that is taught in the section of nazirus is appropriate to be read on the Shabbos following Shavuos, the holiday on which we commemorate our experience at Mt. Sinai.

## Exactly As They Are

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from the YUTorah shiur given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on June 7, 2019 )

In this week's Parsha, we learn about Birkas Kohanim. *Daber el Aharon v'el Banav Leimor: Koh sevarochu es Bnei Yisroel.* Koh means exactly as is. Why is it so important to do it as is?

So, there are two perushim that I want to share. Rav Hirsch reads it more *kepshuto*. *Koh sevarochu*—in exactly these words; no more, no less. Not an allegory or an embellishment. Not approximately these words. Not this idea. Exactly these words. Why is this so important? We try to keep the whole of the Torah as accurately as possible. So why is there an extra emphasis here on *koh sevarochu*? Rav Hirsch points to the concluding pasuk of this mitzvah: *ve-samu es shmi al Bnei Yisroel va-Ani avarecheim.* It's very important to realize that even though there are Kohanim and Rebbes, there are special and holy people, etc., ultimately, it's not the people who have any power. Ultimately, everything is from Hashem. So by telling Kohanim *koh sevarochu*, Hashem tells them: Don't think you have the power to bless. Don't think that you are greater than everyone else, that you have all the kochos, that you give the brachos and run the world, and therefore, you can say whatever you want. No. *Koh sevarochu*. The Kohanim are just messengers from Hashem. They say exactly the words Hashem commanded them—no more, no less. And they have an opportunity to convey Hashem's brachah to Jewish people. But it's not in the power of the Kohanim to give the brachah. The Kohanim just say the words, and Hashem is the One who gives the brachah. Therefore, they must speak exactly what Hashem commands, to show that it's Hashem's power. That's based on peshat.

But on the level of drash, I saw in the name of the Zvolener Rebbe that *koh sevarochu* refers to Bnei

Yisroel, not the words that the Kohanim say. He also explains *koh* to mean as is. However, he takes it in a different direction. Someone might say: I understand the Torah says to bless the Jewish people. But that's if they would be frum—if they were good—if they had the right values—if they lived up to whatever they had to live up to. It's so easy to find excuses. Oh, yeah. I would love the Jewish People if they did this and that. But the way they are now, they are so messed up. They do so many things wrong. They are so corrupted that I just give up on them. Or this part of the Jewish people is ok, but the other part we can just throw in the garbage—they are not *ra'uy* for the bracha anymore. It's so easy to fall into this temptation, seeing all the things wrong with the world today. It's so easy to look at the Jewish people and say: That's not the same Jewish People that Hashem meant to bless. Therefore, Hashem commands the Kohanim: *Koh sevarochu*. *Koh*—as they are. Whatever the Jews are. I don't care whether they are on this madreiga or that madreiga—whether they are *tzadikim*, *reshoim*, *beinonim*, etc.—however they are, they are worthy of brachah. Don't start asking if these are the good kind of Jews and those are the bad kind. Just whatever the Jews are, *koh sevarochu*. However, they are, you should love them, bless them, and try to bring them close to Hashem, put Hashem's brachah wherever they are. And that's really the job of the Kohen. He should be an Ohev, like Aron ha-Kohen—*ohev shalom ve-rodef shalom; ohev es ah-brios u-mekarvam le-Torah*. Wherever the *brios* are. You don't wait until they are *mekuravim la-Torah* until you bless them. You love them and bring Hashem's brachah to where they are. And then, once you accept them as they are, they will come close to Torah. *Koh sevarochu es Bnei Yisroel*. Shabbat Shalom.

## Fighting Evil: Three Holy Families, Three Holy Missions

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

Parshas Naso continues with the count that Hashem commanded Moshe to perform with Bnei Yisrael in the desert, focusing on the three Levite families, Gershon, Kehas, and Merari. The camp of Bnei Yisrael in the desert was arranged in an organized fashion. The

Mishkan stood in the middle surrounded by the *levi'im*, with one Levite family on each of the three sides, and Moshe and Aharon and their families on the fourth.

Chassidus sees deep meaning in the way the camp was organized.

First, we will study one of the classic ideas developed by Chassidus: the spiritual concept of kohen and levi. Within the tribe of Levi itself, we have kohanim—the children of Aharon—and the rest of the tribe, the levi'im. They respectively represent *chesed* and *din*, the two pillars of God's creation. Hashem created the world with *chesed*, generosity. He gives us so much goodness in order for us to exist. During creation, God also exercised the trait of *din*, justice, and restrained Himself. He restrained the world from degenerating into chaos by instituting the laws of nature.

These are the two principles of the world: *chesed*—spreading out and sharing kindness—and *din*—restraint and restriction, justice and law.

The kohen, the epitome of kindness, represents *chesed*. Aharon Hakohen was *oheiv shalom v'rodeif shalom*; he loved and pursued peace. The levi'im represent *din*, the trait of justice. When Moshe faced the great crisis of the golden calf, he asked (Shemos 32:26), "*Mi lashem eilai? Who will join with Hashem and me to establish the rule of Torah law in this camp? We will stamp out the traitors who betrayed Hashem by serving the idol.*" The levi'im came to Moshe, representing the law of the Torah.

The three Levite families—Gershon, Kehas, and Merari—each had a different mission. Kehas had the most exalted role in the Mishkan. They took care of the kodesh and kodesh hakodashim. They carried the aron, menorah, mizbechos, and the shulchan, the holiest vessels of the Mishkan. Gershon had the second-level job. They carried the covers that formed the roof of the Mishkan. Merari had the lowest-level role, the difficult job of carrying the heavy beams of the Mishkan and the courtyard.

### Three Struggles to Overcome Evil

The Avnei Neizer offers an interesting insight into this division. The levi'im represent *din*, a community that focuses on the law. They are the *sur mei'ra* community, embodying different strategies for dealing with the problem of evil. We all face challenges from our yeitzer hara, and there are three ways to contend with it. This applies to the struggle between good and evil on several levels: within each one of us, between us and the environment outside, and between the Jewish People and its enemies.

One approach, and the highest level, is that we become so good, righteous, and pure that evil doesn't surface within us at all. We don't even think of doing evil. We are totally immersed in and focused on the good such that evil

doesn't come close to us at all.

At the second level, we do think of evil and its temptations. It approaches us and tempts us, but we are able to summon the power within ourselves to drive away those evil thoughts.

The third way of coping with evil is less perfect. The evil side emerges within us and puts evil thoughts and temptations in our minds. We struggle with the evil thoughts but don't succumb to them. My actions are good; I don't let the evil control me. However, it is still inside me. I am continuously tempted and struggling, even though I may successfully control it. This option of combating evil is also considered success, albeit with a bitter side. The evil urges exist within me, and I live with them but do not give in. I can't run away from them or chase them away, but I am still in control of my actions.

### The Three Families

The Avnei Neizer explains that this describes the spiritual idea of the three families within the tribe of Levi, the three ways of dealing with evil. The members of Kehas are able to enter the Holy of Holies and take the Ark. They must be so pure and cleansed of any evil to be able to go into the holiest place, to take the holiest object in the world and put it in on their shoulders. They march with God Himself, Whose holy presence is in the Ark. What purity of character those people must have had! Their goodness is so complete that evil doesn't approach them. Evil stays far away from them; they are completely good, devoid of any evil urges.

Gershon is the second family, a notch below Kehas. In Hebrew, the first few letters of Gershon's name—*gimel-reish-shin*—spell *geresh*, meaning to drive away. Their name represents their spiritual level. They do think of and are tempted by evil, but they drive away temptation from their mind and bodies. They knock it out, like a fighter knocks out his opponent.

The third level is the family of Merari. *Mar* means bitter. The people of Merari are *tzaddikim*, but they are in a continuous, bitter struggle with evil urges. They are successful and don't give in to the evil impulses. They maintain their commitment to Torah, but the struggle is unending.

We all wish that we were like the family of Kehas, who had no battle or struggle at all. We would even be happy to be like Gershon, to drive away an evil urge whenever it rises within us.

Many of us, though, are like the family of Merari, who must continuously fight against evil every day. The Gemara says that the yeitzer hara of a person rises up against him each day (Kiddushin 30b). He rises more refreshed than we do in the morning, with new plots. Most of us are like Merari, constantly fighting a bitter and difficult battle.

According to the Ba'al Hatanya, the great founder of the Chassidic dynasty of Chabad, Hashem greatly appreciates this bitterness. In fact, He appreciates this struggle even more than the righteousness of Kehas and Gershon. Hashem has tremendous feelings of sympathy, compassion, and appreciation for Merari's tremendous effort to fight a difficult battle against evil every day.

### Three Primal Creative Forces

According to Chassidus, there are three energies that account for much of our experience in this world: *chesed* (kindness), *din* (justice), and *rachamim* (compassion). These three energies are not just psychological forces. *Chesed* is the movement of expansion, like water gushing forth and spreading outward. *Din* is restraint. If *chesed* is the action, then *din* is the reaction. Whereas *chesed* moves out, *din* restricts that movement. A ball rolls down a hill, gaining energy—this is like *chesed*. Then it goes up the hill, losing speed—this is like *din*. The balance between the two is *rachamim*, the balanced middle ground, where there is restrained outward movement. This is giving within calculated limits.

Rav Chaim Vital said that Gershon, Kehas, and Merari represent these three movements. Kehas is *chesed*, Merari is *din*, and Gershon is *rachamim*. Kehas is so pure, with so much godliness and holiness, like a pure stream of water that gives life to everything around it. No evil comes close to Kehas. Avraham, the man of *chesed*, the first Jew, gave to everyone around him. He never even thought of doing evil. He only thought and did kindness.

The next level is Merari, *din*. He experiences the bitterness of *din*, the struggle against evil. Today, we too live in a world where we cannot escape being faced with temptations. There is so much evil around us in so many different forms, and we struggle with it. The power to defeat evil is *din*. We know there is strict law. We have to do what's right, we have to be strong, and we have to develop the koach of *din* within us. Even in the most bitter and challenging times, we will do what is right. We will struggle as much as we need to, and with God's help, we

will succeed. In this struggle, our model is Yitzchak, who represents *din*.

Finally, Gershon stands between Kehas and Merari, between *chesed* and *din*, between sweet kindness and the strict rule of law. This family represents *rachamim*, the combination of *chesed* and *din*. *Rachamim* is neither complete kindness nor complete justice. Kehas never sees evil, while Merari lives with evil all the time and struggles with it. Gershon is tempted by evil but drives it away. In this, Yaakov is our model of *rachamim*.

### Three Dangerous Desert Animals

In Parshas Devarim, Moshe Rabbeinu recounts the Jewish travels in the desert. Moshe describes the desert as a place that had *nachash*, *saraf*, and *akrav* (snakes, serpents, and scorpions). The Shem Mishmuel explains that these three dangerous animals represent the evil counterpoints to the three points of *chesed*, *din*, and *rachamim*.

Hashem, the Creator of the world, made everything with a parallel. He made a dual creation containing both good and evil. In Parshas Nitzavim, God said, "I have placed in front of you life and death, good and evil" (Devarim 30:15). There are *chesed*, *din*, and *rachamim* on the good side. Unfortunately, and fortunately, there is another side. It is unfortunate because we can fall into the other side. However, it is our good fortune that the other side exists, because now we can exercise our free will to choose what is right. There exists the wrong kind of giving, the wrong kind of law, and the wrong kind of compassion. We must choose the right side.

The Shem Mishmuel explains that the *akrav*, the scorpion, represents coldness. It is the opposite of the goodness of giving. It is like ice. While water gives life to all, ice has nothing to give. The scorpion is a cold creature, unmoved. There are some people who are cold and unmoved by the plight of other people. A person of *chesed* is moved by others' troubles, to the point of taking action to help them. But on a glacier, nothing grows. There is nothing there for anyone else. The egocentric person is only concerned about himself; he is frozen like a glacier. This is the opposite of Kehas, *chesed*. Like Avraham, Kehas had such strong feelings of *chesed*. Everyone's problems were Avraham's problems. Even the troubles of Sedom became Avraham's concern. He thought he could reach even people who meted out the death penalty for giving charity. Avraham was only good.

In the desert, the Jewish People learned what *chesed* was

and how to defeat the scorpion. They learned how to heat up the tundra of indifference. We must be concerned about every one of God's creatures. This is a major lesson of Torah that the Jews learned during their forty-year march through the desert.

### **Poisonous Serpents and Powerful Passions**

The *saraf* is the poisonous snake. When it bites a person, this snake injects a poison that creates a fever which burns up the person. The *saraf* represents misplaced fire and energy. This is the destructive side of the *yeitzer hara* in its most powerful expression. The heat of passion and desire can destroy the godliness of the human being like the fiery poison of a snake which can destroy a person's body. This is the negative side of *Merari*. *Merari* has to contend with the burning side of fiery passion. This is the ultimate level of *din*, the most difficult fight. In the desert, the Jewish People had to learn about this. For example, the daughters of Midyan presented Bnei Yisrael with the temptation of forbidden relationships. Many of us have to fight this battle and, like the family of *Merari*, we can't give up.

This is the struggle today, with the widespread culture of pleasure-seeking without guidelines of morality or restraint. The third creature that the Jews met in the desert was the giant snake. He is a combination of the poisonous snake and the scorpion. He doesn't have the same venom as the poisonous snake, but he has great power to crush and destroy. He is not ice-cold like the scorpion, although he is still cold. This is the evil side of *rachamim*. Some evil people are not totally indifferent to people's pain. They are involved with other people, but they get involved in order to dominate, control, conquer, and manipulate. They build themselves up over others. These are the wicked leaders of the world. We have come across such manipulators and power-hungry people. They will help you when it suits them, but they will never help you if it takes away from their own power. The Soviet communists were these kinds of leaders.

The family of *Gershon* is in between *chesed* and *din*. They have the power of *rachamim*, kind compassion. They help all people in the proper measure. *Gershon* doesn't give everything away, but rather gives twenty percent to charity. *Din* says give just ten percent, and *chesed* says give away everything. We should give twenty percent. Only one person in a generation should give away everything like *Avraham*. We should be like *Yaakov*, in between the extremes of *chesed* and *din*. This is the balance of *Gershon*.

### **Thirsting for Good Things**

On the fourth side of the *Mishkan*, *Moshe*, *Aharon*, and the *kohanim* made their homes. They represent connection with *Hashem* in the deepest, closest way. This is the fourth thing that *Moshe* mentioned about the dangers of the desert. The python, the poisonous snake, and the ice-cold scorpion are the three primary dangers. The fourth danger is *tzima'on*, thirst. Some people, unfortunately, have a thirst for evil. But *Moshe* and *Aharon* have a deep thirst for God. This thirst is the key to developing measured *chesed*, *din*, and *rachamim*.

The *Shem Mishmuel* uses this system to explain the *Gemara's* advice on how to deal with evil urges (*Brachos 5a*). The *Gemara* says that if the evil inclination approaches you, study Torah. If studying Torah doesn't help, say *krias shema*. And if saying *krias shema* doesn't help, think about the day of death. Torah has such a power that evil doesn't even approach it.

When we study Torah, our minds are so captivated by the holiness of the Torah's thoughts that we have no interest in anything else. Certainly, no evil can enter our minds while we are studying Torah. Torah has the power to drive evil away from our consciousness.

Some of us, though, can't learn Torah so much, so we say *krias shema*. One who reads *shema* should be thinking, "I accept God's will, and I will try to drive away evil. I will push away the evil thoughts." This is the *koach* of *Gershon* and *Yaakov Avinu*. If, for some reason, a person can't learn Torah and doesn't have the power of *krias shema* to drive away evil thoughts, then he should think of the day of his death. How will I meet my Creator? This is a bitter pill. Death is called the bitter day, *yom mar* (see *Amos 8:10* and *Mo'eid Katan 21a*). The bitterness of death can help us attain the sweetness of success in defeating our *yeitzer hara*.

As we hear these powerful ideas of the *Shem Mishmuel*, let us pray that we receive the appropriate levels for our souls. Some of us will be like *Kehas*, completely beyond evil. Some of us will be like *Gershon*, able to drive evil away. And some of us will be *Merari*.

Day in and day out, we will struggle with evil, but we will never give in. We must always control and defeat our evil urges, always.

May *Hashem* help us in the *zechus* of *Levi*, the soldiers fighting against evil. May their models help us in our own struggles against evil in our own lives.

# Never “Get Over It”

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Let the stranger praise you, but not your own mouth.” This proverb from Mishlei implies that often, outsiders, are better able to distill the virtues which we ourselves, take for granted. Ironically, it is oftentimes hateful and antisemitic slander which reminds us of the deeper qualities of Jewish identity.

A few weeks ago, Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City, ridiculed observance of Passover. Contemptuously, he mocked that “it [Pesach] happened over 3000 years ago..get over it”.

Despite his malicious scorn, Rudy is absolutely right, and, of course, absolutely wrong. Yetziat Mitzrayim did occur over 3000 years ago, but we can’t “get over it”, nor for that matter, do we ever want to “get over it”.

We call this inability to “get over it” by a different name. We call this distinctively Jewish trait “historical consciousness”. We don’t live in a historical vacuum but are tethered both to the past generations as well as to a long lineage of future people we will never meet. As Elie Weisel once observed “Jews are born old”. Most of us can trace our yichus genealogy to four or five previous generations, despite the horrific interval of the Holocaust. Many of us carry names of ancestors we never met, but whose stories we retell and whose lives inspire our own. Beyond our genealogical familiarity, we are also coupled to our past through the great people whose works we study, whose ideas elevate us, and whose heroism shapes our lives.

Yomim tovim connect us with our glorious past. We celebrate the very same chagim which past generations observed, and in almost the same exact fashion. For us, chagim don’t commemorate archaic events which happened “over 3000 years ago”. For someone with historical consciousness, these epic events “happened” last year, and they “happened” fifty years ago to our parents, and they will keep on happening, every year, in the very same manner and on the exact same date.

## Napoleon didn’t laugh

Rudy Giuliani scoffed at our historical consciousness, but Napoleon stood in awe. Walking by a synagogue, he heard men wailing in a foreign language. Inquiring about the odd sounds, he was informed that on Tisha b’av Jews were grieving for their lost mikdash. In response to his inquiry as to how long ago this tragedy occurred, he was informed that

the calamity causing all this ruckus occurred over 1800 years earlier. Fascinated with our collective memory he remarked “A nation that can mourn for so long the loss of its land and temple, will return one day to their land and see it rebuilt”. Within 150 years, his prophecy partially materialized. No too long after Napoleon’s First Republic of France fell, we rebuilt our own history. It is likely that some of the descendants of those wailing French Jews who lay crumpled on the floor, currently walk with pride in the land of Israel.

I was recently asked which Jewish subject is most neglected in American Orthodox chinuch. As a Rabbi, I was probably expected to highlight an area of talmud torah study which is deficient, and whose study should be bolstered. I replied that the topic of Jewish history was insufficiently instructed in school curriculums. In the absence of any historical framing, mitzva observance can become lethargic and can, eventually, wilt under social and cultural pressures. A historical context lends backdrop, texture, and spirit to religious practice. Additionally, historical consciousness provides numerous building blocks for religious success.

## Timeless Values

Culture, customs, and human conduct are always in flux, and, as social standards fluctuate, cardinal values tend to fade. Judaism enshrines fundamental and immutable values which are impervious to the ebb and flow of time. Our core values, divinely delivered and therefore unassailable, are all riveted to holidays, and our observance of these holidays reinforces the timelessness of these beliefs. Pesach underscores divine sovereignty, human liberty, and Jewish destiny. Shavuot confirms that an entire nation heard the directly revealed voice of Hashem, while embracing a life of commandment and covenant. Sukkot demonstrates both divine providence for individuals as well as divine authorship of history. On Rosh Hoshana we submit to divine justice while accepting moral accountability. Yom Kippur reminds a fallen person that Hashem is compassionate and offers teshuva and forgiveness. Historical holidays

reinforce core religious values, preventing their slow but gradual erosion. Historical consciousness reminds us that, despite the pressures of society, we possess eternal values, which remain immune to the ravages of time and culture.

## Belonging

We are social animals, but sadly, we often sever ourselves from relationships and from community, sinking into the dark abyss of individualism and loneliness. As the modern world expands, we are becoming ever more lonely. We exchange information at breakneck speed, but we are quickly losing the art of communication, and when communication fails, we “unbelong” and sink into solitude. Historical consciousness connects us to a multi-generational community and redeems us from the loneliness of unbelonging. We live alongside generations of people of shared values and of common destiny.

Ironically, belonging to a historical community often strengthens affiliation with actual contemporary communities. Ideally, life in Israel is patterned upon this correlation between historical commitment and live communal experience. As we are all living through a common historical narrative, and one which we share with our past, we feel, or should feel, a deeper identification with one another. Belongingness is contagious.

We are not meant to live alone. Halachot such as kosher restrictions, minyan requirements and shemirat Shabbat all encourage clustered living. Historical awareness, and in particular, communal chagim reinforce these communal bonds which ritual establishes. Belonging to something larger than ourselves boosts happiness and well-being, while strengthening faith.

## Mortality and Meaning

We are all haunted by our mortality. Everything we accomplish and everything we build in our limited time on earth will ultimately fade to dust. We all hear Shlomo Hamelech's gloomy voice whispering that man is futile, and his accomplishments are empty. What possible meaning can our limited lives possess? Without any meaning, life is

empty, and we struggle for identity and for purpose.

In part, we transcend the limits of our mortality by incorporating our own lives into a larger historical partnership. We are partners in a larger historical project called Jewish history, and each brick we lay serves as the foundation for future brick layers. Together, with laborers of the past, we jointly craft Jewish history. The edifice may not be completed by the time we leave this earth, but our lives have acquired worth and purpose. As they catapult future generations to loftier heights, our accomplishments are never pointless. Historical consciousness responds to Shlomo's charge that all human achievement is vacant, by reassuring us that nothing is vacant when aligned with the arc of Jewish history.

## Lives of Accountability

Living in history also makes us more accountable to history. It is easy to detect the ripple effects of past generations. We benefit from their successes just as we suffer from their malfunctions. The past 2000 years of galus have been an agonizing nightmare instigated by the religious collapse of previous generations. The past has carved out the present.

The future holds similar expectations for us. Historical accountability forces us to inspect our behavior and to make decisions based on long term factors. This is especially true in Israel where our decisions will affect all future generations of Jews. Modern culture encourages the deflection of personal responsibility, but historical consciousness mandates lives of accountability. Accountability forces us to behave with conscience, selflessness, and vision.

The secret of Jewish faith is that we never get over the past. We continue to create a past for the future.

## A Lesson in Middos from the Korbanos of the Nissim

*Mrs. Michal Horowitz*

**A**t the end of this week's parsha, Parshas Naso, we learn of the korbanos (offerings and gifts to the Mishkan) of the twelve Nissim (tribal princes), which they offered on the occasion of the Chanukas ha'Mishkan (inauguration of the Mishkan) (Bamidbar, Chapter 7). Hashem commanded Moshe that the princes should offer their offerings in the order of the tribal encampments (Rashi to Bamidbar 7:11). Hence, the

Eastern Division (East was considered the front), consisting of the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun, brought their offerings first, in that order. The first prince to offer his offering was the Nasi of Shevet Yehuda, Nachshon ben Aminadav (Bamidbar 7:12-17). He was followed by the Nasi of Shevet Yissachar, Nesanel ben Tzuar. And he was followed by the Nasi of Shevet Zevulun, Eliyav ben Cheilon.

In precise and repetitive detail, the Torah lists the exact



# The Bridge Between Body and Soul

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

The Torah speaks of a person who chooses to become a *nazir* with the phrase **כִּי יִפְלִיא לְנִדּוּר נָדָר** כי יפליא לנדור נדר. This *pasuk* is the basis for the use of the term **הַפְּלִיאָה** in reference to the halachic concept of vows. The Rambam names one of the fourteen books of his *Mishneh Torah* **הַפְּלִיאָה**, and this book consists of all the *halachos* relevant to vows and oaths, including the laws of *nezirus*. This word stems from the root **פלא**, which means “wonder.” Why is this term used to refer to vows?

Rav Yitzchak Hutner explains the word **הַפְּלִיאָה** based on the Rama’s discussion (*Shulchan Aruch*, O.C. 6) of the conclusion of **אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵר**, the *beracha* recited after performing one’s bodily functions. After expressing gratitude to God for this remarkable mechanism, whereby the body retains the nutrients from food and discharges the waste, one concludes, **בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה’ רֹפֵא כָּל בָּשָׂר וּמַפְּלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת** (“Blessed are You, Hashem, healer of all flesh, who performs wonders”). The Rama explains that the expression **מַפְּלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת** refers to the “wonder” that the soul can reside within the body. The physical body and the spiritual soul are opposites; they are two entirely different entities, which should not be able to merge together into a hybrid that is the human being. The *Mishna Berura* adds that the **פלא** of the merging of body and soul can be seen in the fact that food sustains both. When we eat, the food sustains our physical bodies, providing them with what they need to continue operating, but the food also sustains our soul, keeping it within the body. This is truly a **פלא** – that God

devised a system whereby body and soul, two diametrically opposite entities, can be simultaneously sustained by the same substance and the same mechanism.

On this basis, Rav Hutner suggests, we can understand why the word **הַפְּלִיאָה** is used in reference to vows, the power with which we are endowed to create new halachic realities through a verbal pronouncement. The faculty of speech marks the intersection, or the bridge, between body and soul. The ability to speak is unique to human beings among all physical creatures, because it is a product of the soul, which only human beings possess. Speech is the way we use our physical bodies to express abstract and profound ideas. It brings our thoughts, feelings and emotions into our physical world, allowing them expression through physical means. As such, speech signifies the extraordinary blend between our physical and spiritual elements, between the body and soul. This is why speech can be used to change a halachic reality. Through the spoken word, a person can transform himself into a *nazir*, subjecting himself to certain halachic restrictions and obligations. A person can proclaim a vow to obligate himself to do something, or to abstain from something, and this vow is binding. As the power of speech originates from the soul, it has spiritual power. Therefore, this area of *halacha* is called **הַפְּלִיאָה**, because it demonstrates the wondrous interplay between body and soul, how our physical and spiritual components work together, in tandem, despite being diametrically opposite one another.

# Our Brother, Our Sister—the Proselyte

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week’s parasha, parashat Naso, we learn of an intriguing law concerning a person who takes possession of money that does not belong to him. This unlawful act may take the form of not returning a loan, withholding overdue wages, or simply stealing money from a fellow Jew. The sinner in this case has also compounded the crime by swearing falsely that he owes or took nothing.

The Torah prescribes how a penitent thief or embezzler may achieve forgiveness. Numbers 5:7 reads, **וְהִתְדָּוּ אֶת חַטָּאתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ, וְהָשִׁיב אֶת אֲשָׁמוֹ בְּרֹאשׁוֹ, וְחָמִישֶׁתוֹ יֹסֵף עָלָיו, וְנָתַן לְאִשֶּׁר אָשָׁם לּוֹ**. *The [sinner] shall confess his sin, make*

*restitution of the principal amount, add a fifth to the value, and return it to the owner.*

This law is an amplification of a law that already appeared previously, in Leviticus 5:20-26, and is repeated here in parashat Naso because of two new features: 1) If the thief voluntarily confesses, he is required to bring an offering, and make an additional 20% payment to the victim and 2) we learn from the verse in Numbers 5:8, which states: **וְאִם אֵין לָאִישׁ גֹּאֵל, לְהָשִׁיב הָאֲשָׁם אֵלָיו, הָאֲשָׁם הַמּוֹשֵׁב**: *ואם אין לאיש גאל, להשיב האשם אליו, האשם המושב*, that if the victim has no relatives to whom the debt can be returned, the returned funds belong to G-d,

and are given to the Kohen—the priest.

Rashi, immediately asks, וְכִי יֵשׁ לָהּ אָדָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂאִין לוֹ? גּוֹאֲלִים, *Is there any person in Israel who has no redeemers, either a son or a daughter, or some related kin from his father's family, tracing the relationship back to our forefather, Jacob?!*

Rather, concludes Rashi, this must refer to a convert who has passed on, and has left no heirs. The Midrash Rabbah in Bamidbar Rabbah (8:1, 2, 3) notes that this law underscores the special effort the Torah makes to protect proselytes, for they are in G-d's eyes as beloved and as important as those born Jewish.

The mitzvah of loving and caring for the גֵּר, the convert, is mentioned more often than any other mitzvah in the Torah—in fact, it is repeated 36 times! It is often said, that a society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. Therefore, it is not at all surprising, that the commandment to care for the proselyte is preeminent in Jewish tradition.

Indeed, the Jewish people have greatly benefitted from, and been profoundly enriched by, those who have converted to Judaism.

According to tradition, Shmaya and Avtalyon, the teachers and mentors of Hillel and Shamai, were converts to Judaism (Tractate, Gittin, 57b). Onkelos, the foremost translator of the Bible was a convert as well. Some descendants of even vile enemies of the Jews, such as the grandchildren of Sisra, Senacherib, Haman and the Emperor Nero, are believed to have converted to Judaism.

There is, however, an ambivalence reflected in Jewish tradition that reveals a bias against converts. So, for instance, the rabbis consider converts responsible for the sins of the Golden Calf and the trespassers at the Graves of Lust. They maintain that it was the הָאִסְכָּרִים, (Numbers 11:4), the mixed multitudes--the Egyptians who embraced G-d and left Egypt together with the Jews during the Exodus, who led the people astray. That is why the rabbis in Talmud Kedushim, 70b, declare, וְכִי יֵשׁ לָהּ אָדָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּסַפְּחָהּ--*converts are as troublesome to the Jewish people as a skin disease.*

There are those who say that the rabbis are suspicious of converts and harbor antipathy toward them because they fear that the converts may lapse and return to their

original faith and behavior. There are, however, many who see this statement in a favorable light, somewhat of a back-handed compliment. Converts are troublesome to the Jewish people because they make those born Jewish look bad, by the converts' often enthusiastic devotion and commitment!

Because of Judaism's high regard for converts, there is even a special blessing for them included in the central daily prayer, the Amidah. The blessing begins with the words, וְעַל הַצְדִּיקִים וְעַל הַחֲסִידִים וְעַל זִקְנֵי עַמְּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְעַל פְּלִיטָת, וְעַל גְּרֵי הַצְדִּיק, וְעַל הַצְדִּיקִים וְעַל הַחֲסִידִים וְעַל זִקְנֵי עַמְּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְעַל פְּלִיטָת, וְעַל גְּרֵי הַצְדִּיק. We pray for the righteous, for the devout, for the elders, for the remnant of the scholars, and for the righteous converts of Israel.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the ultimate redeemer of Israel, the Messiah himself, is expected to be a descendant of perhaps the most famous convert to Judaism, Ruth the Moabite.

To underscore how special converts can be, I share with you the following remarkable letter that I received in December 2003:

*Dear Rabbi Buchwald,*

*This comes to wish you and your family a happy Hanukkah and to share with you our joy in all you have done for our son, Baruch! We are very grateful to you, and to the Beginners class at Lincoln Square Synagogue, for welcoming him, nurturing him and converting him to Judaism, with which he feels so very much "at home." I had the same feeling when I, attending your service, participated in the prayers and songs, heard the lesson and partook of the delightful lunch afterwards. I can understand his joy and his peace and his love for Torah.*

*Thank you so much!*

*Shalom.*

*Sincerely,*

*Barbara and Bob xxxxxx*

This letter is from the non-Jewish mother of Bob [Baruch] who attended the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service. Bob, 24 years old at the time, was a graduate of Princeton and holds an MA in Philosophy from Oxford University. He then went on to study in a Yeshiva in Jerusalem, Israel.

Alas! If only Jewish mothers would be so positive and so grateful when their children become observant.