



**THE 10 DAYS OF  
REPENTANCE:  
A Display of G-d's  
Overwhelming Attribute  
OF MERCY**

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## Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Vayeilech



**THE 10 DAYS OF  
REPENTANCE:**  
A Display of G-d's  
Overwhelming Attribute  
**OF MERCY**

### G-d's Intimate Relationship with the Jewish People

“Moshe said to the Jewish people – who is as great as our G-d? Whenever we call out to Him, He responds.”

*Gemara:* We see G-d's attentiveness to one's supplication. Regardless of the time of year, whenever the Jew calls out to G-d, He will respond to his supplication.

The Prophet *Yeshaya* said to the Jewish people, “You should seek out G-d when He is found. Call to Him when He is close.” The words of *Yeshaya* seem to contradict the words of *Moshe* to the Jewish people indicating that G-d does not respond to the Jew whenever he calls to Him, but rather, during a specific time when G-d is found and close.

*Gemara:* The statement of *Moshe* refers to the supplication of the Jew within the context of a *tzibur* (quorum). Because of the merit of the community,

G-d will respond to them whenever they call out to Him. The statement of the prophet is addressing the supplication of the individual for his personal needs during the Ten Days of Repentance between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, which is the time when G-d is close.

*Rambam:* Although repentance and crying out to G-d is something that is always positive, during the ten days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* – it is considered more special. During these ten days, G-d responds immediately to one's repentance as it states, “You should seek out G-d when He is found.”

This is referring to the repentance and supplication of the individual. However, whenever the community (*tzibur*) repents and cries out to G-d with a whole heart (*lev sholeim*) G-d responds to them.

*Rambam:* Although a community can call out to G-d at any time, they must do so wholeheartedly in order for Him to respond. Regarding the supplication of the

individual during the Days of Repentance, it does not mention that he must do so wholeheartedly. It must be because of the intimacy that exists between the Jew and G-d at this time. Even if the Jew supplicates G-d in a context that is lacking in wholeheartedness, G-d will nevertheless respond.

In addition, regarding the supplication of the individual during the Ten Days of Repentance, *Rambam* mentions that G-d will respond and answer the individual's prayer "immediately." However, regarding the whole-hearted prayer of the community throughout the year, he does not mention that G-d will answer them "immediately." This implies that although G-d may respond to the supplication of the community throughout the year, it is not with the same degree of immediacy as the prayer of the individual during the Ten Days of Repentance.

Jewish law dictates that if one intentionally violates the *Shabbos*, one is liable for the death penalty by stoning, which is the most severe of the death penalties. However, if one violates *Yom Kippur*, he is only liable for spiritual excision.

*Shalah HaKadosh*: Since *Yom Kippur* has the identical restrictions as the *Shabbos* in addition to its own particular restrictions, indicating that the holiness of *Yom Kippur* is no less than the *Shabbos*, one would think that if a Jew were to violate *Yom Kippur*, his degree of liability should be no less than violating *Shabbos*. If so why is one only liable for spiritual excision for violating *Yom Kippur*?

Although in truth, one should be liable for the death penalty for violating *Yom Kippur*; however, because the intensity of Divine Mercy is so overwhelming on *Yom Kippur*, it does not allow the individual to be put to death for his transgression. Therefore, he is only liable for spiritual excision.

During the Ten Days of Repentance, G-d's Attribute of Mercy is at such an overwhelming level that even if the supplications of the individual are lacking in wholeheartedness, G-d will nevertheless accept them and respond immediately. Whereas throughout the year the prayers of the individual need to be within the context of the merit of the quorum in order to be accepted.

In addition, even the community with its merit must cry out with a "whole heart." If it is lacking in this quality, it may not be accepted. However, since it is not a time of Mercy throughout the year, even if the

prayer of the community is accepted, G-d may not do so immediately. Understanding the value of the Ten Days of Repentance, one should take advantage of this special time of closeness and intimacy to supplicate G-d for forgiveness and blessing.

## Gaining a Spiritual Sense

"Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel..." What is the meaning of "these words" to which the verse is referring?

*Midrash*: "G-d with His Wisdom, established existence." "(Proverbs) There is no wisdom other than the *Torah*. G-d established existence with the *Torah*. However, it was not referred to as '*Torah*' until it was given at *Sinai*. Why was it only then referred to as '*Torah*'?"

It is because the numerical value of the word '*Torah*' alludes to the number of *mitzvos* that were given to the Jewish people at *Sinai*. The number of *mitzvos* of the *Torah* are 613 and the numerical value of the word *Torah* is 611. The two that are lacking from the total are the two *mitzvos* that were heard directly from G-d by the Jewish people at *Sinai*.

Therefore, every person should understand and comprehend with his intelligence, to engage in *Torah* study day and night and to do good deeds. Why is it important to be continuously engaged in *Torah* study and good deeds every day? It is because the entire world is judged every day.

Through the act of one individual the entire world could be judged as meritorious or as culpable. If the world is found culpable due to the sin of one individual, "One sin may destroy much good." (Ecclastes)

There are times that the world stands in the balance – half meritorious and half culpable. If one were to sin, regardless of how minor it may be, the entire world will be swayed to being judged as culpable through him. In contrast, if one were to do one additional *mitzvah*, it will be sufficient to sway the balance for the entire world to be meritorious due to him. Fortunate is the one who brought merit to the world!

What if one did not study *Torah* sufficiently? He should at least do his *mitzvos* with sincerity. What is the relationship between studying *Torah* and performing *mitzvos*?



If the world is standing in the balance where one action can tip the scale, one would think that each individual would be responsible in his observance of the *mitzvos*. However, we see from the *Midrash* that one's capacity to appreciate the precariousness of existence within the spiritual realm must be predicated with the unceasing study of *Torah*. It is only when one is able to grasp the innate value of even the most minor *mitzvah*, and the unfathomable destructiveness of one transgression, can one act responsibly.

The average person sees the world from a physical perspective. The evaluation process is based on material criteria. If the economy is stable or about to collapse or if society is affluent and thriving or failing and needy is an understanding that has no relevance to whether the world will continue or come to an end.

The only one who could appreciate the underlying cause for existence, which allows it to continue or go into the oblivion, is one who has a spiritual perspective. This is only the one who engages in *Torah* study day and night. Because this individual is sufficiently spiritualized, he is able to understand that at any moment the world could be in the balance. Therefore, he will act responsibly to do the meritorious act, the *mitzvah*, and not transgress.

However, the *Midrash* continues, "If one did not study *Torah* sufficiently" in order to be spiritualized to this degree, he should then minimally perform the *mitzvah* with sincerity. By doing the *mitzvah* with sincerity, he will be imbued with holiness and have a greater sense of the balance of existence. As it states in the blessing that one recites before the performance of a *mitzvah*, "...You have sanctified us through Your *mitzvos*."

## **Spiritual Orientation, a Prerequisite to Serve G-d**

"Moshe commanded them saying, 'At the end of seven years, at the time of the Sabbatical year, during the festival of *Succos*, when all Israel comes to appear before Hashem, your G-d...you shall read this *Torah* before all Israel, in their ears. Gather together the people – the men, the women, and the small children... so that they will hear and so that they will learn, and they shall fear *Hashem*, your G-d, and be careful to perform all the words of the *Torah*.'"

On the second day of *Succos* (first day of *Chol HaMoed*) of the eighth year following the Sabbatical cycle, the

entire Jewish People; men, women, and children, must gather on the Temple Mount to hear the reading of the Book of *Devarim* (*Mishna Torah*) by the King of Israel.

The purpose of this reading is, "So that they (the Jewish people) should listen and learn to fear Hashem, your G-d and be careful to perform all the words of this *Torah*." The objective of the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* is so that the Jewish people should have fear and reverence for G-d. As a result of this reverence, they will observe the dictates of the *Torah* properly.

During the Sabbatical year the Land of Israel must remain fallow, and one is not permitted to engage in agricultural activities. The Sabbatical year is referred to by the *Torah* as, "*Shabbos L'ashem* (A Sabbath for G-d)."

*Sforno*: "*Shabbos L'ashem*" is a year that one should be dedicated to *Torah* study, introspection, and meditation. The Sabbatical year should be devoted completely to spiritual growth and advancement. It is only after this year that the Jewish people gather on the Temple Mount in order to hear the King of Israel read the Book of *Devarim* to learn to revere G-d and keep His *Torah*.

One would think that if the Jewish people were given an opportunity to dedicate an entire year to spirituality through introspection and the study of *Torah*, they should first go to the Temple Mount and be inspired and impacted by the reading of the *Torah* by the King. By hearing the Book of *Devarim* being read in this public setting in the presence of the entire Jewish people, one would become inspired and uplifted and thus revere G-d. One would then have the capacity to utilize the Sabbatical year in the most meaningful way.

However, it is clear from the order given by the *Torah* that this is not so. But rather, after a full year of spiritual immersion followed by *Rosh Hashanah*, the ten days of Repentance when a Jew must seek out G-d because He is closest at that time, and *Yom Kippur*, only then must the Jewish people ascend the Temple Mount. Why is this the correct order of events?

For one to have the capacity to internalize and be the complete beneficiary of the reading of the *Torah* on the Temple Mount, one must first undergo a spiritual orientation. In order to facilitate this, one must dedicate a full year to be immersed in *Torah* study and reflecting on one's spirituality. This is done without any distraction whatsoever due to one's livelihood.

The Sabbatical year is truly a year dedicated for G-d (*Shabbos L'ashem*). After dedicating a year in this context, one experiences *Rosh Hashanah*, the Ten Days of Penitence, culminating with *Yom Kippur*, during which one is spiritually purified before G-d as it states, "Before G-d you shall purify yourselves."

This is then followed by experiencing "You shall rejoice in your holidays" with *Succos*. It is only after all of this spiritual orientation and mentoring that one has the capacity and sensitivity to be a full beneficiary of the *Hakhel* event, the objective of which is to revere and fear G-d.

## The Key to the Jewish Soul

There is a positive commandment (*Hakhel*) that in the eighth year after the seven-year Sabbatical cycle, the king of Israel must read the Book of *Devarim* to the entire Jewish people gathered on the Temple Mount.

"At the end of seven years...when all Israel comes to appear before *Hashem*...you shall read this *Torah* before all Israel, in their ears. Gather together the people – the men, the women, and the small children... they shall hear and they shall learn to fear *Hashem*..."

The purpose of the Jewish people gathering to hear the reading of the *Torah* is so that they should study it and learn to fear G-d.

*Ohr HaChaim*: Although a woman is not obligated in the mitzvah of *Torah* study, she nevertheless must observe the *mitzvos* which have relevance to her life. She must hear and learn the *mitzvos* that pertain to her.

In contrast, men are obligated in the study of *Torah* independent of it being the prerequisite for the performance of *mitzvos*. As a result of studying *Torah*, the Jewish people will learn to fear G-d and come to observe all the *mitzvos* properly. The only way one can come to revere G-d is through the study of *Torah*. The *Torah* itself has the innate ability to touch upon the spirituality of the Jew to cause him to have a sense of G-d.

In addition to understanding one's obligation, the study of *Torah* sensitizes the Jew to spirituality. Without being impacted by the study of *Torah*, the spirituality of the Jew remains dormant.

*Midrash Eicha*: "G-d said, "Better that you (the Jewish people) would have abandoned Me (for idolatry) and

kept the *Torah*; because its illumination would have brought you back to good (proper path)."

If one engages in *Torah* study (with a sincere commitment), the innate holiness of the *Torah* will have a profound illuminating effect upon him. It will activate his spirituality.

Just as when one bathes himself, regardless of intent, he will be cleansed, identically if one immerses himself in *Torah* study, one will develop a spiritual sensitivity that will cause him to become enlightened. He will then fear G-d.

*Rabbeinu Yonah*: The prerequisite for *teshuvah* is the recognition and appreciation of one's sins. If one does not understand the nature and gravity of his transgressions, he will not repent. What is the process that one must undertake in order to appreciate his shortcomings and cause him to repent?

We say in the blessing for repentance in the *Amidah* (Silent Prayer), "Bring us back our Father, to Your *Torah*, and bring us near, our King to Your service, and influence us to return in perfect repentance before You..."

We see from this blessing that the process to do *teshuvah* is predicated first in engaging in *Torah* study. He must then actualize that *Torah* study through the observance of *mitzvos*. It is only after studying *Torah* and performing *mitzvos* that one has relevance to returning in "perfect repentance before G-d." It is only through the study of *Torah* that one can truly appreciate the wrong that he has done.

The process of *teshuvah* is similar to that of *Hakhel*; the Jewish people must hear the *Torah* in order to study it to come to fear G-d. If one does not experience G-d as a reality in his life, he will not have the capacity to repent. The study of *Torah* is the key to ignite the Jewish soul. As it is stated, "The *mitzvah* is the lamp and the *Torah* is the light."

## Achieving Clarity through Judgment

*Gemara*: The ten days from *Rosh Hashanah* to *Yom Kippur* are known as the Ten Days of Repentance. These days are also referred to as "the days of mercy" because G-d's relationship with the Jewish people is more intimate than the rest of the year.

“You should seek out G-d when He is found. Call to Him when He is close.” (Yeshaya) Since G-d is close to the Jewish people and avails Himself for their supplications, it is the most opportune time to repent and call out to Him.

*Gemara:* The days of mercy begin with *Rosh Hashanah* and end with *Yom Kippur*. *Rosh Hashanah* is the Day of Judgment. It is a day that even the angels in heaven tremble because of G-d’s exactness of justice. If this is so, how could *Rosh Hashanah* be considered as being one of the days of mercy?

In Psalm 47 which precedes the blast of the shofar, King David writes “Ascended has G-d with the blast *Hashem* of the shofar (*Ola Elokeem b’sruah Hashem b’kol shofar*)” We see that at the beginning of the verse G-d is referred to by the appellation “*Elokim*” which connotes the Attribute of Justice. The conclusion of the verse refers to G-d by the appellation “*Hashem* (YKVK)” which connotes the Attribute of Mercy.

*Midrash:* Initially, at the beginning of *Rosh Hashanah*, G-d sits on the Throne of Judgment; however, when He hears the blast of the shofar, He ascends from the Throne of Judgment and sits on His Throne of Mercy.

While it is true that *Rosh Hashanah* is the Day of Judgment and a time when the prosecution against the Jewish people is most intense; nevertheless, as soon as the shofar is sounded, it causes most the advanced level of Divine Mercy to come upon them because it reminds G-d of the *Akeidah*. The blast of the shofar converts *Rosh Hashanah* from a day of trepidation and fear of judgment, to a day of great mercy. Therefore, *Rosh Hashanah* is included among the ten days of repentance.

*Reb Yisroel Salanter:* Why does *Rosh Hashanah*, the day of judgment precede the day of *Yom Kippur*? Seemingly, the logical order should have been that first

we are given the opportunity to repent in a context of G-d’s Great Mercy and then He will judge our record on *Rosh Hashanah*?

“Of King David; *Hashem* is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” (Psalms)

*Midrash:* “*Hashem* is my light” alludes to *Rosh Hashanah* and “my salvation” alludes to *Yom Kippur*.

*Reb Yisroel Salanter:* In order for one to be able to appreciate and understand the gravity of his predicament, he must first stand before G-d in judgment, which is at the most intense level. Only after being shaken by G-d’s Judgment does one have the capacity to reflect responsibly and take the necessary steps to repent.

*Rosh Hashanah* is the illumination. It is the enlightening moment that gives the individual a glimpse of his reality. This is the reason *Rosh Hashanah* is the precursor to the ten days of repentance and culminating with *Yom Kippur*.

At the outset of *Rosh Hashanah*, the *Satan* is given permission to prosecute the Jewish people, causing the most exacting level of judgment. With such a level of scrutiny and exactness, it would be most difficult for the Jew to merit a positive verdict.

We must first blow the shofar on *Rosh Hashanah* in order to silence the prosecution and incapacitate *satan*. This will allow the most advanced level of G-d’s Mercy to come about. It will be a context in which repentance and the supplications of the Jew will be embraced by G-d.

The days of mercy must begin with *Rosh Hashanah* with the sounding of the shofar to climax with the ultimate moment of Mercy, which is *Yom Kippur*, allowing the Jew to achieve spiritual purity.



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