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CONTENTS: Jotkowitz (Page 1); Ekstein (Page 6); Stein Hain (Page 10); Kurin (13); Landes and Landes (Page 18)

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THE STAGGERING BRILLIANCE OF RAMBAM'S FOURTH CHAPTER OF THE LAWS OF REPENTANCE

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Anyone who has ever studied *Mishneh Torah*, from the novice student to the most advanced scholar, immediately senses Rambam's unparalleled ability to organize and elucidate complex halakhic discussions from a wide variety of ancient texts and sources. This observation certainly holds true for Rambam's ten-chapter discussion of the *Laws of Repentance*. The first chapter introduces the principle of *teshuvah* (repentance). The second chapter teaches how one does *teshuvah*. The third chapter explains how God judges a person and the difference between a righteous and wicked person. The fourth chapter lists 24 behaviors that prevent

teshuvah. The fifth and sixth chapters, at the center of *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, extoll the principle of free will, which, for Rambam, is the basis of *teshuvah*. The seventh chapter teaches that repentance also applies to non-desirable character traits and how repentance can bring one closer to God. The eighth and ninth chapters discuss the rewards for following the commandments in this world and the World to Come and the goodness of messianic times. The tenth chapter teaches that even though there are a multitude of rewards for following the commandments, they should not be the primary reason for following the will of God. Rather, following God's will should be based on love of God. In this chapter, Rambam defines what exactly is love of God, and it is thus a natural transition to the next book in *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Ha-Ahavah*, the Book of Love.

Notwithstanding the meticulousness and rational order of the chapters in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, the fourth chapter seems out of place. Why exactly did

Rambam feel it was necessary to enumerate these 24 items? What is especially interesting about this list is that it appears nowhere in the Talmud or anywhere else in tannaitic or amoraic literature. Already in Rambam's own time, his readers were curious about the origins of the list and queried the Rambam about his source: "Of the list of 24 things that hold back *teshuvah*, is it a *tosefta*, or is it found in the Talmud?" Rambam answered that the list is not found "in the Gemara, the Tosefta, and not in the Sifra or the Sifri." As the petitioner himself noted, Rambam's only source for this list appears to be from the writings of Rif.¹ Looking at the original quotation from Rif, however, will help us appreciate Rambam's brilliance:

Twenty four things prevent *teshuvah*: gossip, derogatory speech, hotheadedness, bearing evil thoughts, befriending an evil person, partaking of a meal that is insufficient for the hosts, gazing at private parts, partnering with a thief, proclaiming I will sin and then repent, celebrating at the demise of a friend, separating oneself from the community, ridiculing one's ancestors, ridiculing one's teachers, cursing the public, preventing others from doing a *mitzvah*,

influencing a friend to go in the wrong way, using the deposit of a pauper, accepted a bribe to influence a judgment, not returning a lost object, seeing one's child going in the wrong direction and not protesting, eating the food of orphans and widows, arguing on the words of the wise ones, suspecting the innocent, hating criticism, [and] mocking the *mitzvot*.²

It is readily apparent that Rambam used his unique genius to radically transform this citation. Rif simply lists 24 items that hold back *teshuvah*. Rambam rearranged the list, divided the items into five categories, explained why they each hold back *teshuvah*, and added the crucial caveat that "All of the above, and other similar transgressions, though they hold back repentance, do not prevent it entirely. Should one of these people repent, he is a *ba'al teshuvah* and has a portion in the World to Come."³

As opposed to Rif's other commentators, Rambam felt that each item on the list must have a specific reason why it "holds back *teshuvah*," as he went on to elucidate the reason for each. In contrast to this, Rav Hefetz, one of Rambam's predecessors, simply suggested that these 24 items generally "distance

¹ *Iggrot Ha-Rambam* (Shilat edition) vol. 1, p. 209. Translation my own.

² Rif, *Yoma* 6a. Translation my own.

³ All translations of Rambam are taken from https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/911898/jewish/Teshuvah-Chapter-Four.htm

oneself from God," without explaining how exactly they "hold back *teshuvah*."⁴

Aside from demonstrating his organizational brilliance, one may still ask why Rambam felt the need to include this somewhat obscure rabbinic teaching in his meticulously organized *Hilkhot Teshuvah*. To answer that question, we need to look closer at some of the five categories listed by Rambam. The first thing one notices is that the majority of the sins in all five categories are related to sins between man and his fellow man, such as causing others to sin, or not returning lost objects. The few sins that on the surface don't seem to fit into this paradigm have an interpersonal aspect as well. For example, the sin of gazing at someone's private parts is certainly a sin between man and God, but it is also treating another human being as an object. In fact, the theme of the whole chapter is the relationship between the community and the *teshuvah* of the individual. Indeed, the only word repeated in the entire *perek* is *kahal* (community):

Therefore, it is proper for each and every community and community (*kahal ve-kahal*) in Israel to appoint a great sage of venerable age, with [a reputation of] fear of heaven from his youth.

I will say more on the significance of the word *kahal* later. With this insight, though, the first category of the chapter ("severe sins") becomes readily understandable. The first three sins are all related to causing other people to sin, which, in the context of the chapter detailing the relationship between the individual and the community, is the severest of sins.

The one sin that does not seem to fit into this paradigm of severity is "saying I will sin and repent." How is this related to causing other people to sin? I think Rambam himself answered this question. If one looks closely, there is an inward movement in the *halakhah*. It starts with the community, then your friend, then your child, and finally yourself. *Teshuvah* is hard to obtain in these cases because you caused, or are responsible, for the sins of others, and in order to receive atonement you have to repair your relationship with your community, your friends, and your children. Rambam's beautiful insight is that you also have to repair your relationship with yourself to be forgiven. We can now also understand what Rambam means when he says, "God will not grant the person who commits such deeds to repent." Rambam himself explains the phrase in his *Commentary to the Mishnah* (Yoma 8:7): "God will not help him do *teshuvah*." The theme of the chapter is that a person does not live on an island and needs the help of friends, teachers,

⁴ Rav Hefetz ben Yatzliah, quoted in Adiel Kadari, *Studies in Repentance: Law, Philosophy and Educational Thought in*

Maimonides' Hilkhot Teshuvah (Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2010), 136.

and community to do *teshuvah*. But one also needs the help of God, as He is also part of the community. The element of "measure for measure" now becomes apparent. If you cause other people in the community to sin, God won't help you repent.⁵

We can now also understand why, in the midst of a chapter listing items that hold back *teshuvah*, Rambam adds the *halakhah* (cited earlier) about each community needing to appoint a sage "to admonish the masses and motivate them to *teshuvah*." The *halakhah* of *tokhahah* (rebuke) is, in its essence, about the responsibility of the community to prevent individual members from sinning, which is exactly the theme of the chapter.

Rambam makes one final important change to Rif's list.⁶ While Rif listed these 24 things as categorically preventing *teshuvah*, Rambam (as I noted earlier) emphasized that even though the support of the community and one's friends and teachers is extremely important in an individual's journey towards atonement, it is not decisive. It might be hard and seem impossible, but a person does possess

the ability to return on his or her own. This crucial point leads directly to Rambam's next chapter, where he transitions from the community's role in supporting and encouraging *teshuvah* to the responsibility of the individual.

One biblical character surprisingly makes a very brief appearance in this chapter:

One who demeans his teachers; this will cause him to reject and dismiss him as [Elishah did to] Geihazi.⁷

Why did Rambam feel it was so important to mention Geihazi? What does his mention add to our understanding of the chapter? I think it is that his story encapsulates Rambam's message in this chapter. To briefly summarize his story, Geihazi lied to his teacher Elisha about taking the spoils of war, and for that reason he and his children were punished with leprosy, which almost by definition cuts one off from one's community (II Kings, chap. 5). In addition, the Talmud (*Sotah* 47a) teaches that Geihazi also prevented others from learning from

⁵ The last item Rambam enumerates beautifully encapsulates the whole theme of the *perek*, namely, don't make friends with a wicked person because you will learn from his or her deeds. The community which includes one's friends and neighbors should be a source of encouragement and inspiration to one's spiritual and religious development, not an impediment.

⁶ Rambam makes another change to Rif's list:

...one who sees his son becoming associated with evil influences and refrains from rebuking him. Since his son is under his authority, were he to rebuke him, he would have separated himself [from these influences]. Hence, [by refraining from admonishing him, it is considered] as if he caused him to sin.

The implication of Rambam's formulation is that if the rebuke would not be effective, there is no obligation to rebuke. This addition could be of tremendous consolation to parents dealing with wayward and searching children who know in their hearts that rebuke is not the best method to reach their children and return them to the fold.

⁷ In the Frankel edition, Jesus is also mentioned in addition to Geihazi. Rambam probably bases this addition on *Sotah* 47a, where Jesus is mentioned. It would be interesting to look further at Rambam's use of biblical characters in his *Mishneh Torah*.

Elisha. But the story doesn't end there. In the continuation of that same passage from the Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan tells us that Geihazi and his three children were the four lepers who discovered that the Arameans had abandoned their siege. Because of their honesty in promptly reporting this, they wound up saving the people from starvation (II Kings, chap. 7). Their honorable actions enabled them to return to the community. This short story demonstrates Rambam's teaching that it is possible even for a person cast off from his or her community to return to God. How was it possible for the estranged Geihazi to return? Rambam answers that question in the last *halakhah* of the chapter:

All of the above, and other similar transgressions, though they hold back repentance, they do not prevent it entirely. Should one of these people [*adam*] repent, he is a *Baal-Teshuvah* and has a portion in the world to come.

In other words, these items can hold one back, but not prevent one, from doing *teshuvah*. How does that work? The answer is immediately given in the first *halakhah* of the next chapter:

Free will is granted to all men [*adam*]. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his.

Nothing, not even these 24 items, can overcome the will and free choice of a person. In the words of Rambam in the second *halakhah*:

Each person [*adam*] is fit to be righteous like Moses our teacher, or wicked like Jeroboam. [Similarly,] he may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or [acquire] any other character traits. There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative and decision, tends to the path he chooses.

When reading the chapter, one quickly realizes that the word *adam* (person) is very prominent. In fact, it appears 23 times. I would like to suggest that this corresponds to the 24 items that hold one back from doing *teshuvah*. Rambam is teaching that nothing can prevent a person using his or her free will from doing *teshuvah*.

If my supposition is correct, though, where is the missing *adam* to reach the number of 24? In the Frankel edition of the Rambam, the word *adam* is repeated in the second *halakhah* of the fifth chapter:

Each person and person (*adam ve-adam*) is fit to be righteous like Moses our teacher, or wicked like Jeroboam.

This repetition is not found in the standard Vilna

edition. Not only does this addition create the numerical equivalence between the fourth and fifth chapters, but the repetition of the word *adam* parallels the repetition of the word *kahal* in the fourth chapter, echoing the respective themes of each chapter.⁸

We can now understand both why Rambam included the list of 24 items in *Hilkhos Teshuvah* and the chapter's placement within *Hilkhos Teshuvah*. The chapter highlights the importance of the role of community in the *teshuvah* process. *Teshuvah* has traditionally been viewed as a solitary experience of the individual standing before his or her Creator, but the crucial theme of the chapter is the vital role community can play in this process. Nonetheless, because of the awesome power of free will, even a man divorced from their community, for whatever reason, still has the ability to return to God. Rambam's use (and reinterpretation) of Rif's list of the 24 things that prevent *teshuvah* highlights this point and showcases his organizational brilliance and phenomenal creativity.

⁸ If one were to assume that the Vilna text is correct, one could suggest that the missing *adam* is in the last *halakhah* of the previous chapter quoted above, "Should one of these people [*adam*] repent, he is a *ba'al teshuvah* and has a portion in the world to come." This would serve to connect the two chapters. The key is that a person can rise above his or her circumstances and return to God at any time or place, even without the help of his or her community. Rambam was certainly aware of the phenomenon of counting words to create meaning, as this technique is used in the Talmud. It would be interesting to see if Rambam consistently used repeated words to create meaning. One can see another example in *Hilkhos Megillah ve-Hanukah*, chapter 4, where the word *bayit* (house) is

I would like to thank David Fried for his outstanding and professional help in editing this paper.

WHAT IS TESHUVAH? CONTRASTING THE RAV AND RAV LICHTENSTEIN

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In memory of David Landes zt"l—this piece is a continuation of our never-ending conversation.

The most intense and inspiring period in *yeshivot* is the month of *Elul* and the ten days of *teshuvah* (repentance). The new year begins with excitement and anticipation, but it is also an intense time devoted to *teshuvah*. The day begins with the piercing sound of the shofar intended to arouse us from our spiritual stupor and entails a scrupulous, demanding review of our behavior. The forty days of "*Elul zman*" are devoted to a concentrated, deep, religious period. Yet it isn't always completely clear

repeated. My article on this is available at: <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/chanuka/chanuka-holiness-temple-and-home>

One can also suggest that the repetition of the word *adam* is related from another perspective to the theme of the chapter. There is a recurring duality in the chapter, e.g., between life and death, blessing and curse, and wise and foolish, which is a reflection of the choice given to every person to be good or evil. Thus, the crucial question of the chapter is what *kind* of *adam* does a person want to be? The repetition of *adam* serves in a literary sense to highlight this stark choice and opportunity given to every person.

exactly what the contents of this period are meant to be. Is it an exercise in self-flagellation? Is it a time to accept new resolutions? Will the intensity of my prayers guarantee an automatic clean slate?

Over the centuries there has arisen a diverse range of opinions and books that discuss at length the question of what is *teshuvah*? Wide-ranging writers have chosen different themes to develop in line with their times, cultures, and personalities. I'd like to look at key characteristics of Rav Soloveitchik's lectures on *teshuvah* that were published in *Al Ha-teshuvah*,¹ a classic work, and compare it to Rav Lichtenstein's lectures on *teshuvah* published fairly recently in the volume [*Return and Renewal*](#).² The comparison has particular interest in light of the fact that R. Lichtenstein is both a devoted student of R. Soloveitchik and his son-in-law. Thus, any differences between the two are despite what they share in common.

R. Soloveitchik for many years presented a *teshuvah* lecture, a major, well-attended event with hundreds of rabbis and laymen. Pinchas Peli, who translated and published the lectures, describes them in his introduction (7-12) as an unforgettable experience where R. Soloveitchik transformed halakhic innovations—via his inspiring, fiery, passionate delivery—into a spiritual dramatic experience. R. Soloveitchik's dramatic style in his learning and delivery made his lectures an almost theatrical

performance.

In these lectures, he infused his learned inferences with passion and narrative. His brilliant creative readings and *hiddushim* (innovations) are dramatic enough by themselves. But the performance was enhanced not only by the novelty of his innovations but also through the stories within which he framed them.

For example, on page 17, R. Soloveitchik talks about the nature of sin:

There is a concept of the impurity of sin. All of *Tanakh* is full of descriptions of the contamination, filth, and disgust engendered by sin. A sin is as if one displaces the divine crown from a person's head and damages his spiritual wholeness... A person who sins changes his legal status... The person before his sin isn't the same person as he is after the sin... The sin uproots him from his natural rights from his humanity. He is utterly transformed... His previous self flees, and a new self comes in place.

The interpretation is remarkable. R. Soloveitchik animates sin with such emotion and action that one

¹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Al Ha-teshuvah*, ed. Pinchas Peli (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 1974). All page numbers refer to the Hebrew edition. Translations are my own.

² Aharon Lichtenstein, [*Return and Renewal: Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth*](#) (New Milford, CT: Magid Books, 2018).

can no longer think of the abstract idea of sin in the same way. Instead, one sees filth, decay, disgust, a damaged spirit, a rotted self. Sin is transformed from doing something wrong into a dreadful loathing. The drama and emotions become frightening and alive.

In another example, in his description of *vidui* (confession) on page 47, he ponders why the *vidui* begins with the word *ana* (please). He asks, “What is this request ‘*ana*’? Does ‘*ana*’ refer to a huge entreaty? What is one asking for? I sinned?” He explains that within the “*ana*” is both hidden and hinted the very possibility of repentance. “If we listen carefully to the agonized and heartbreaking cry ‘*ana*,’ it is begging from God to please not shut the door in my face. ‘*Ana*’ don’t lock me out. Give me a chance to plead...” R. Soloveitchik further explains, “Repentance is irrational. The angels don’t understand it... they want to shut the door. But God subverts the angels in order to accept people who repent.” The penitent is trying to stop the door from being slammed shut by the angels. God sabotages simple reason in order to allow us, the sinners, to repent. A single word of prayer is brilliantly transformed into a powerful conflict and story.

The last example I would like to bring refers to a crucial understanding of R. Soloveitchik on repentance. On page 134, he talks about seeing *teshuvah* as much more than merely purifying oneself from sin but as a full renewal of one’s covenant with God, a type of conversion, which he compares to the actual process of converting to Judaism. Furthermore, in a careful reading of

Rambam [chapter 7](#) (in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*), he talks of repentance as enabling a person to recreate himself. He is no longer the same person he was before. In Rambam’s words, “Yesterday *this* man was hated before God, abominable, distanced, repugnant. And today *he* is loved, pleasant, nearby, and a friend.” R Soloveitchik emphasizes, “First ‘this man’ and then ‘he’” (230), “and the radical change... instantaneously the repugnant sinner turns into a beloved good person” (232). Rambam, along with R. Soloveitchik’s interpretation, transmutes the reality of repentance into a revolution.

R. Soloveitchik’s *derashot* are brilliant and insightful. They make concepts come alive; they create theatrical narratives that carry the reader along in awe and amazement. They are rousing and turn every-day *teshuvah* into moments of cosmic significance—from the purging of filthy decay, through foiling the angels from sealing the gateways of repentance, to ultimately result in rebirth.

There are times when repentance is indeed experienced in such earth-shattering ways. But on a practical basis—and perhaps I am only speaking for myself—repentance doesn’t ordinarily feel so radical. I do not consider myself righteous, but I also do not consider myself wicked. There is much I need to improve, but it hardly feels groundbreaking or akin to becoming an entirely new person—certainly not on an annual basis. Perhaps R. Soloveitchik did feel that way on a regular basis, or perhaps he was only speaking about unique moments. Either way, in my day-to-day, or year-to-year reality of *teshuvah*, it is hard to recreate the fervor and

conversion that R. Soloveitchik is portraying.

R. Lichtenstein's book is also a collection of his annual *teshuvah derashot* transcribed and edited by students. But he has a very different style in his learning, writing, and content. He is passionate but far less exhilarating and theatrical. His style is dryer, more painstaking, and meticulous. He is systematic, comprehensive, and analytic, and at times he can seem tedious. But for most people, he is far more relevant.

The first essay in his book (1-18) deals with *teshuvah* as obligation and opportunity. He has a brief halakhic discussion about whether *teshuvah* is an obligation and quickly concludes that it must be: "The very existence of the opportunity imposes a fresh obligation... It is inconceivable that a person who attaches significance to his own spiritual state should be totally impervious and insensitive to the ability to restore his relationship to God and to cleanse himself. If, indeed, he does not seize the opportunity, this is both a symptom and a cause of spiritual weakness" (7). He writes later in the chapter about the need to seize opportunities: "The failure to exploit spiritual opportunities... is not some kind of pallid passivity but in the perception of *Chazal*, it is spiritual rot. One needs to repent from the failure to exploit spiritual potential" (8). In characteristic R. Lichtenstein style, there is no turmoil or revolution. Instead, there is stoic obligation and duty. However, this notion that we must take every opportunity to cleanse ourselves, to become closer to God and to repent from missed opportunities, easily applies to ordinary people.

Many of R. Lichtenstein's other *derashot* also discuss notions that lack major upheaval but are real, down-to-earth topics that an average person can relate to. In his second chapter, he discusses the purification of hearts. On page 32, he cites the Ramban that "our service to the Almighty [should] be with our entire heart, to wit, with proper and complete *kavvana*... without any kind of interfering thought... To love the Lord with all your heart..." Can any of us claim to be loving God with all our heart at every moment? I think not.

In the following chapters, R. Lichtenstein discusses further concepts of *teshuvah* that relate to every man. Is partial *teshuvah* possible? On the one hand, can one truly repent if one is fairly sure he or she will sin again? On the other hand, should one entirely give up on repentance if one doesn't think he or she will be able to permanently change his or her thinking, behavior, and feelings? R. Lichtenstein maintains that one should absolutely repent, even partially, as long as one's failure is not due to indifference. If one truly wants to do *teshuvah* but is unable to, his or her *teshuvah* is of value and accepted. He discusses mediocre *teshuvah* and its importance. We must invest what effort we can even if the results are not as impressive: "We must recognize that *teshuva* is not simply a destination attained; it is a direction pursued" (118).

R. Lichtenstein talks about our too-often spiritual inattentiveness, the too-frequent absence of the presence of awe and fear of God. He speaks of gradations of sin and how one ought to repent even for minor infractions. R. Lichtenstein surprisingly

and reassuringly celebrates not the hero of repentance but the average Joe who tries his best (109). *Teshuvah*, for R. Lichtenstein, is an honest process of self-examination. It is not measured only by results but by the nature of our exertion.

Frequently during the ten days of *teshuvah*, in saying the standard *vidui*, it is hard for me (and for many ordinary people, I imagine) to relate to the terrible sins enumerated. I am aware of commentators who interpret the concessions in a much milder manner. R. Soloveitchik's approach, despite being intellectually exciting and inspiring, fails to help me in my day-to-day approach to *teshuvah*. Maybe I should feel utterly self-disgusted, but I don't. Perhaps I should be recreating myself entirely every year, but I can't. R. Lichtenstein addresses this issue. He states that *teshuvah* is a painstaking obligation even if I haven't committed appalling sins. The process of self-reflection and trying to improve myself, even in miniscule ways, is an endless obligation. It is super significant and the hallmark of spiritual growth and *teshuvah*. Missed opportunities, spiritual inattentiveness, lapses in focus, minor infelicities, and even mediocre repentance are vital and substantial. Every single person must take the process and necessity of repentance seriously.

The contrast between R. Soloveitchik and R. Lichtenstein is apparent. R. Soloveitchik valorizes and emphasizes the hero of repentance. *Teshuvah* stems from a romantic, emotionally laden, and existential crisis. His focus is on the overwhelming self-disgust of sin and the miraculous outcome of transformation. The post-Yom Kippur joy focuses on the result, the transformation. R. Lichtenstein

valorizes and emphasizes the everyman of repentance. His is a more classic, analytic approach, based on spiritual duty and painstaking self-reflection. His emphasis is on the effort and process of repentance, which applies even to minor gains as the result of sincere attempts. The central joy of repentance derives from its very possibility, from the opportunity and the process through which we encounter God. R. Soloveitchik has man soar heights through comprehensive re-creation. R. Lichtenstein has man soaring heights through sheer determination and spiritual attentiveness.

THE TORAH'S SONG

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Review of Geula Twersky, *Torah Song: The Theological Role of Torah Poetry* (Kodesh Press, 2022).

This review is dedicated to my first cousin Shira Shaindel Rodman (née Brilliant) z"l, whose whole being was animated by the Torah's song. She was taken too soon. יהי זכרה ברוך.

T*orah Song* seeks to understand the role played by poetic sections of the Humash. For Morah Geula Twersky, the poetic sections of the Torah are characterized not only by unique form but also by religiously central content. She offers a combination of deep Jewish literacy and the lens of an artist, characterizing biblical poetry as the impressionism

of biblical literature, contrasted with the realism of biblical prose. Having looked up to Twersky since my youth, it was a particular joy to read and review this thoughtful, comprehensive, and religiously inspiring book.

After surveying how traditional and academic scholars have identified biblical poetry – via linguistic parallelism, meter, rhythm, allusion, and other such literary devices – *Torah Song* argues that the true hallmark of biblical poetry is its theological contribution. Torah poetry intervenes in the prose to deliver the central messages of divine sovereignty and God’s covenant with the Jewish people.

To illustrate this thesis, the first half of the book examines three sections expressly labeled *shirah* (song) in the Torah: *Az Yashir* (Ex. 15), the Song of the Well (Num. 21:17-20), and *Parashat Ha’azinu* (Deut. 32). The second half analyzes three sections of blessings in the Torah: those of Jacob (Gen. 49), Bilam (Num. 23-24), and Moshe (Deut. 33). I will outline my observations about each half of the book separately.

The Three Poems

Twersky has much material to work with in *Az Yashir* and *Ha’azinu*, and she does so deftly. Her analysis of *Az Yashir* focuses on the unity of the poem manifest in its chiasmic, thematic, and literary structure. And her analysis of *Ha’azinu* suggests various literary allusions to other Torah passages which deal with the cycle of sin and punishment. Twersky’s attention to the fine points of language reveals allusions that might escape even the most seasoned student of the Bible. But the most

impressive feat of the first half of the book is her treatment of the Song of the Well – because it is a mere four verses! Undaunted, Twersky employs an intertextual lens, relating the Song of the Well to two other songs in *Sefer Bamidbar*.

Methodologically, Twersky’s analysis of biblical poetry is both thematically and linguistically intertextual, drawing on writings from throughout the Bible to understand both denotation and connotation. This adds new layers of meaning that would not have been obvious to the reader of these three songs. For example, she argues that the terminology *ga’oh ga’ah* in the Song of the Sea indicates divine enthronement, akin to its usage in Tehillim 93 and elsewhere. Twersky’s reading techniques deepen the reader’s understanding of the philosophical messaging both latent and explicit within the poems.

Twersky’s overall message lies in the centrality of theological content within each poem and the relationship among the three poems. All three, she argues, advance the theme of God as sovereign and Israel’s acceptance of such: *Az Yashir* “celebrates the defeat of Pharaoh and the establishment of the earthly manifestation of God’s realm; the Song of the Well...focuses the lens on Israel’s role as the object of God’s compassion and munificence... The Song of Moshe is an amalgam of both core ideas. It reflects upon God’s sovereignty as it meditates upon Israel’s irrevocable bond with God throughout history (103).” Moreover, each poem invokes the active engagement of its audience: “Then Moses and the Israelites sang (Ex. 15:1)”... “And Miriam chanted for them: ‘Sing out to God’ (Ex. 15:21),”

“Then Israel sang this song: ‘Spring up, O well – sing to it’ (Num. 21:17),” and “Write down this poem, and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths (Deut. 31:19).” For Twersky, Israelite assent to the covenantal content of the poems is critical.

The Three Blessings

The latter half of *Torah Song* examines three passages of extended blessings in the Torah, and this is where the author’s creativity shines uniquely. On the one hand, Twersky’s approach to these blessings matches her approach to the songs described in the first half of the book: she attempts to portray each blessing as a cohesive and well-structured literary whole, and looks for thematic relationships between the three blessings’ texts.

Yet, her understanding of the blessings struck me as refreshingly innovative. Twersky argues that Jacob’s blessings comprise a unified whole, positing two pillars of Israelite leadership, represented by Judah and Joseph, and supported and protected by the other tribes. Her ability to read these atomized blessings as a whole lends a bigger picture to the pericope. And, most surprisingly, she suggests that while Judah’s leadership is monarchic, Joseph represents priestly leadership. She finds allusions to priestly leadership in the term *nazir* (v. 26),¹ by understanding *giv’ot olam* (v. 26) as “the mountains of God” rather than the more common “age-old

hills.”² in the aspects of Joseph’s general narrative that allude to priesthood - e.g., his *kutonet* (tunic), dream interpretation (considered a priestly role in ancient Egypt), and more. Joseph represents the vision for the priesthood prior to the sin of the golden calf, namely that it belongs to the *bekhor* (firstborn).

Twersky’s treatment of Bilam’s blessings likewise struck me as quite original. She suggests a thematic stacking, as it were, among his first three blessings:

- Blessing one (Num. 23:7-10) describes the dwellings and the fecundity of the Israelites.
- Blessing two (Num. 23:18-24) describes how God as divine monarch rests among the Israelites.
- Blessing three (Num. 24:3-9) combines the themes of blessings one and two by discussing the dwellings and fecundity from blessing one and the divine monarchy from blessing two.

Moreover, she suggests that his fourth blessing (Num. 24:15-19) – which focuses on Israelite monarchy (rather than divine monarchy) – harkens back to Jacob’s blessing of Judah in Bereishit 49. This is exemplified by their shared imagery of the lion (Num. 24:9; Gen. 49:9) and the scepter (Num. 24: 17; Gen. 49:10), as well as other commonalities.

¹ See Ex. 29:6; 39:30; Lev. 8:9; 21:12. See Lev. 22:2 for the *n.z.r.* root related to the Temple and priesthood.

² This translation depends on understanding *olam* as a divine epithet (see *Hagigah* 12b), the Bashan mountain range found

in Joseph’s land allotment being called “the mountain of God” in Psalms 68:16, and the terminology of *harerei kedem* (“ancient mountains”) used in Moses’ blessing of Joseph (Deut. 33:15) as having a theophanic connotation.

Twersky likewise seeks a unified picture in Moses' tribal blessings. She finds them in the imagery scattered through the blessings that indicates parts of the human body as well as priestly and Temple features. For human features, she identifies hands (Yehuda, Levi), legs (Asher), head (Joseph), and shoulders (Benjamin). For priesthood or Temple, she locates the priestly breastplate (Levi), the priestly *tzitz*, or diadem (Joseph, Naphtali), the offer of sacrifices (Zevulun, Yissachar), and the cherubic animals of an ox (Joseph) and two lions (Gad, Dan).³ In sum, she sees these blessings as an affirmation of the Israelites as a *mamlekheth kohanim*, a kingdom of priests. The final step in this analysis is to build a unified structure among all three blessing pericopes in the Torah: Jacob offers the dual pillars of monarchy and priesthood, Bilam ratifies the theme of monarchy, and Moses ratifies the theme of priesthood.

Many ideas in the latter half of the book were new to me: the suggestion of priesthood for Joseph, a connection between the blessings of Jacob and Bilam, and the identification of human and priestly imagery in Moses' blessings. I will also note here that the appendix to the book – a treatment of the terse song of Lemekh in early *Bereshit* – also uncovered layers of meaning that I had never before noticed. And while I do not agree with every assertion within the book, Twersky's observations opened my eyes to new possibilities.

On the whole, this book is wonderful for those seeking a deeper relationship between form and

content in the Torah. Returning to the artistic lens, Morah Geula Twersky's identification of biblical poetry with impressionism is borne out in this work: biblical poems are portrayed as offering broad-stroke theological messaging. Beyond the artistic lens, Twersky's use of both traditional and academic biblical scholarship is quite thorough, and she employs academic scholarship within the constraints of traditional commitments regarding the Torah and Tanakh as a whole.

While rooted in literary methodology, *Torah Song* is actually a book of theology. As Twersky summarizes: "The poetry of the Torah forms a coherent integrated network of musings on Israel's role as keepers of the divine covenant. The songs and blessings of the Torah emerge as a broad meditation on Israel's enduring role in the establishment and preservation of the covenant of destiny established at Sinai" (196).

JEWISH RESPONSES TO THE FORGIVENESS PARADOX

Michael Kurin is a gastroenterologist at MetroHealth Medical Center

Introduction

The 1960s were a time of hope. Unfortunately prematurely, many people believed the world had entered into a post-war period in which all nations would work toward world peace. To this end, both the West German government and the French

³ See Ezekiel 1:10.

government considered applying a 20-year statute of limitations to prosecution of Nazi war criminals. A French moral philosopher named Vladimir Jankelevitch wrote a scathing letter arguing that both governments should refuse, as applying the statute of limitations would be akin to forgiving the criminals.¹ He strongly advocated that they could not be forgiven. Jankelevitch was something of an expert on the topic, having written a book about the philosophy of forgiveness.² There, he defined ultimate forgiveness not as a decision to forget or accept a wrong that was done, but as treating the wrongdoer as if the wrong had never been committed. In his letter, he argued that this ultimate kind of forgiveness can be extended only up to a point. Perpetrators of certain crimes of extreme severity are simply unforgivable. Nazi war crimes and perpetration of the Holocaust are beyond the realm of forgiveness.

Subsequently, and partly in response to Jankelevitch's letter, another French philosopher named Jacques Derrida took the surprising position that real, true forgiveness essentially doesn't exist.³ The purpose of this essay is to explain the paradoxical nature of forgiveness, and to suggest an approach to resolving it based on the thought of Rav Soloveitchik.

¹ Later published as Vladimir Jankelevitch, "Should We Pardon Them?," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 552-572.

² Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, trans. Andrew Kelley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2005).

The Forgiveness Paradox

Derrida outlined two different kinds of forgiveness:⁴ Unconditional (or absolute) forgiveness and conditional forgiveness. Absolute forgiveness is similar to Jankelevitch's notion of ultimate forgiveness. It is the purest form of forgiveness whereby a person wholeheartedly and immediately decides to erase an event in which someone else slighted him or her, without any expectation of repentance or change. By definition, this type of forgiveness can only be offered without any conditions attached, without any action taken by the sinner, and without any benefit to the forgiver. Any such conditions attached to the forgiveness would not be consistent with the complete erasure of the past. This is truly forgiveness for the sake of forgiveness. This is a kind of forgiveness we rarely, if ever, see, but it is the only kind of forgiveness that actually means the transgression is completely deleted from history.

Conditional forgiveness is a more practical form of forgiveness that is familiar to us from our own experiences. It involves a give and take between the perpetrator and the one who was wronged. The perpetrator repents, or shows remorse, and the person who was wronged decides to let it go. In conditional forgiveness, two people decide to move

³ Jacques Derrida, "To forgive. The unforgivable and the imprescriptible," in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo *et al.* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 21-51.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001), 44-45.

on from a past fight, transgression, or wrongdoing, and rebuild their relationship. This is a process of reconciliation, not a pure, automatic, or immediate forgiveness, but a calculation. The wronged party decides that, because the perpetrator changed for the better, repented, or showed remorse, or because the wrongdoing was not so severe, or occurred long ago, it is time to move forward. In this type of forgiveness, the past wrongdoing is not truly erased, it is just moved on from. The wrongdoing is still extant, but it is no longer consequential because the relationship has been mended.

Based on these definitions, Derrida argued that absolute forgiveness can never actually happen in practice. One can split transgressions into two categories. Ones that are forgivable, and ones that are not. When a transgression is forgivable, conditional forgiveness is perfectly sufficient. The two parties can reconcile and move forward, without needing to erase the past. More importantly, absolute forgiveness is definitionally impossible for a forgivable transgression, because any forgiveness offered is inherently tied to the fact that the wrongdoing was forgivable, or that the wrongdoer deserves forgiveness. On the other hand, if a transgression is unforgivable, so terrible that one cannot possibly reconcile with the perpetrator, conditional forgiveness is impossible.

⁵ Edith Wyschogrod, "Repentance and forgiveness: the undoing of time," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60 (2006): 157–168 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-006-0007-4>. Dr. Wyschogrod, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude as my former teacher and the one who introduced me to this topic, suggested that this concern can be mitigated by considering different forms of forgiveness identified in the Yom Kippur liturgy. Kapparah, or atonement, can be defined

The only path forward for one who committed an unforgivable sin is to completely erase it, using absolute forgiveness. However, because the sin was unforgivable, by definition no kind of forgiveness can be offered. One cannot forgive the unforgivable. Therefore, absolute forgiveness is practically impossible for both forgivable and unforgivable transgressions. This is what Derrida calls the "forgiveness paradox."

Jewish Responses to the Forgiveness Paradox

Derrida believed his forgiveness paradox was religiously problematic because he assumed that traditional religion considers absolute forgiveness an important tenet. Others have also noted that it can lead people who have committed unforgivable sins to despair when they realize there is no way for them to be forgiven for what they have done.⁵

It is tempting to think that these problems are of little concern to traditional Judaism. In Judaism, forgiveness is basically always associated with repentance, making it conditional, and Derrida's absolute forgiveness is not necessarily a Jewish value. It may be that traditional Jews should accept that we do not have a concept of absolute forgiveness as defined by Derrida. Forgiveness in Jewish thought is much more similar to conditional forgiveness, whereby a reconciliation occurs

as acquittal, becoming absolved of punishment. Taharah, purification, on the other hand, represents a person's standing, his religious status. While it is true that one who commits an unforgivable crime cannot achieve kapparah, he need not despair because he can still accomplish taharah. However, due to my limited capabilities, I continue to be uncertain as to whether I have fully grasped her thesis.

through remorse and repentance among people and/or between people and God, after which the decision is made to mend the relationship and move forward. There is no inherent religious problem with denying a practical application of absolute forgiveness.

However, even we cannot completely escape the relevance of the forgiveness paradox. The Talmud cites a statement of Resh Lakish:

“How great is repentance, because [through it] intentional sins are made into merits.” (*Yoma* 86b). It’s an incredible claim, and it defies Derrida’s understanding of forgiveness. If Derrida is correct that in the practical realm only conditional forgiveness exists, and in conditional forgiveness the past is never erased, how can Resh Lakish claim that through repentance we can change the past? Not only can we erase the past, but we can edit it to replace sins with merits. That is a power that could only be accomplished by absolute forgiveness, which according to Derrida does not exist.

Is it possible to reconcile the statement of Resh Lakish with Derrida’s understanding of forgiveness? I would like to suggest three approaches to doing so.

1. *Maharsha* to *Yoma* 86b explains that Resh Lakish only meant to say that when a person sins they will feel such remorse that they will overcompensate by doing extra *mitzvot*. In the end, there is a net benefit, in that they

end up with more merits than they would have had they not sinned. *Maharsha* believed Resh Lakish never meant to imply that sins are actually transformed into merits. According to this interpretation, there is no need to invoke the concept of absolute forgiveness, and thus there is no contradiction to Derrida’s philosophy.

2. There is a school of thought that maintains that repentance is a mysterious gift that was given to the Jewish people. It has no rational explanation. Repentance simply breaks the rules of nature. These thinkers embrace the illogical nature of changing the past through repentance, and leave its functionality a mystery.⁶ According to this opinion, there is no need to reconcile the statement of Resh Lakish with Derrida’s understanding of forgiveness. Resh Lakish’s statement actually highlights the mystery of repentance.
3. Rav Soloveitchik similarly emphasized the impact of the process of repentance, offering an innovative interpretation of Resh Lakish’s statement. He explained that the transformation of sins into merits is actually unrelated to forgiveness, and does not necessarily imply editing the past. It is not the forgiveness that turns our sins into merits, but the repentance itself. The mechanism by which we can convert sins

⁶ See, e.g., *Abarbanel* to Shemot 7:1; Maharal, *Tiferet Yisrael* 48.

into merits is not the forgiveness granted for repenting, but rather is a natural outgrowth of the process of repentance itself, when performed to its fullest.⁷

The Rav suggested two mechanisms by which sins can become merits through repentance. First, he suggested a phenomenon called the “impulsion of longing.”⁸ When a person becomes distant from another person or God through sin, that distance may cause them to appreciate the connection that has now been lost. The desire to rekindle that broken relationship will bring more excitement and passion into that relationship than if the sin had never been committed in the first place. In that way, the sin has become a merit.

Secondly, and perhaps more powerfully, he suggested that a deep investigation of the root causes of sin may lead one to discover things about himself that he never knew. He stated,

By sinning, he discovered new spiritual forces within his soul, a reservoir of energy, of stubbornness, and possessiveness whose

existence he had not been aware of before he sinned. Now he has the capacity to sanctify these forces and to direct them upward. The aggression which he has discovered in himself will not allow him to be satisfied with the standards by which he used to measure his *good* deeds before he sinned.⁹

Part of the process of repenting can involve investigating character flaws that have led one to sin, and determining how to channel them positively. If a person is successful in this, he or she will have in effect transformed a prior sin into an asset.¹⁰

The changing of prior sins into merits is entirely disconnected from forgiveness, and thus poses no challenge to Derrida’s belief that only conditional forgiveness exists in practice. It is indeed possible that absolute forgiveness is not a Jewish concept.¹¹ The impetus of repentance then, for Rav Soloveitchik, is not to erase the past, but to embrace the past in a way that transforms our transgressions into merits.

⁷ Pinchas H. Peli, *On Repentance: the Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 2000).

⁸ Ibid., 261.

⁹ Ibid., 263.

¹⁰ I should note Rav Kook suggested a similar idea, in *Orot Ha-Teshuvah* 9:5. Rav Kook writes there that it is imperative for a repenting person to differentiate between the positive and negative aspects of the energy that led him to sin. One must be careful to feel remorse only for the negative aspect and to extract the good from the depths of the bad. In doing so, he

will be able to use that same energy in a positive way, which will transform his sins into merits. Complete or ideal repentance, for Rav Kook, involves a person using all the energies at his disposal, including ones that previously led him to sin, towards the service of God.

¹¹ Interestingly, when considering the liturgy for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, there are many synonyms used to describe what we pray God will do to our sins. These include: *selah*, *meheh*, *marek*, *taher*, *kapper*, *ha’aver*. Although there are different ways to translate some of these, none necessarily translate to erase. The word that does mean erase, *mehok*, is only found in the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer with regards to our “contracts of debt” and not to our sins.

THE YOM KIPPUR WAR AND YESHIVAT HAR ETZION: LETTERS FROM A TALMID

David J. Landes, who was a private investor and independent academic, passed away in September 2019. Yitz Landes is Assistant Professor of Rabbinic Literatures and Culture



Our father, David Landes a"h, in his dorm room in Yeshivat Har Etzion, ca. 1973-74

Our father, David Landes a"h, arrived in Yeshivat Har Etzion in February of 1973, just a few days after his seventeenth birthday. Having left his high school in Chicago a semester before graduation, he was for a time both one the youngest of the *talmidim* in the yeshiva and one of the only Americans. He immediately set to work adjusting to what was for him a foreign culture, a new language, and an extremely high level of Talmud study. He stayed in the yeshiva until the summer of 1974 and returned several years later for another year of study. Until his untimely death in 2019, our father remained an active alumnus of the yeshiva, serving as Chairman of the Etzion Foundation during a period that saw the retirement of his beloved teachers, Rabbis Yehuda Amital and Aharon Lichtenstein z"l.

Over the course of his first year and a half in yeshiva, from February 1973 until July 1974, our father sent an aerogramme to his parents, siblings, and grandfather almost every week. Upon our discovery of most of these letters, which we found in a box in our home shortly after our father passed away, we immediately recognized their importance for those interested in the history of the yeshiva. In these letters, our father describes several important aspects of life in the yeshiva—then still a rather small institution, numbering around 120 students—in its formative years. The letters include many details concerning the daily and weekly schedules in the yeshiva, the experience of Shabbat and holidays in yeshiva, the “learning” itself, and more. Some of the experiences our father recorded in the letters clearly had a lasting impact on him, to the point that he often recounted them to us over the years and chose to mention them in pieces that he wrote decades after his time in yeshiva.¹

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, there has been significant interest in the impact of the war on Yeshivat Har Etzion. As is well known, the yeshiva suffered terrible losses in the war, and its students and *roshei yeshiva* were forever impacted. This has been documented in a recent film produced by the yeshiva, in which our father’s letters are excerpted extensively. The letters, written from the perspective of an American *talmid* trying to update family members with strong ties to Israel, document many of these tragedies and shifts

¹ See David J. Landes z"l, [*Our Roshei Yeshiva: Reflections on the Lives, Thought, and Leadership of Rabbi Yehuda Amital*](#)

[*zt"l and Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l*](#), ed. Yitz Landes (Cambridge, MA: Shikey Press, 2022).

as they were happening. We thus saw it fitting to publish here selections from his letters that were sent during the period of the war and in its immediate aftermath.

* * *

Writing a few weeks before Rosh Hashanah of 1973, in one of his last letters before the outbreak of the war, our father describes his plans for the time off following Yom Kippur:

The זמן is rapidly coming to a close. The 3 weeks of חופש that I have off will be spent on טיולים and the like. I'll have to spend time with my friends who are leaving in a couple of weeks. I'll also be seeing relatives and those people that I know whom are coming in for the next year.²

A bit over a month later, these plans sound as if they came from another universe. In what follows, I reproduce five of his letters in their entirety or with some brief omissions:

10.9.73. Tue. 9, '73 ב"ד

Dear Parents & Zaide,

Today ended the third & ½ day of מלחמת יום כיפור. Overnight the nation has turned into a country very much in the midst of a serious war. The streets are barren of all men of army age, at night there is a

strictly enforced blackout and cars travel with their headlights blackened. There still hasn't [*sic*] been any encouraging reports from the Sinai but the situation in Syria seems to be getting under control.

In the middle of the Haftorah during minchah an army vehicle drove into Alon Shvut. Orders were that a truck would come for the 3rd year guys in a[n] hour and that they should be ready. The T'fillot continued, most of the yeshivah still didn't know what had happened and would not know until after מעריב. After מעריב the news was announced and everyone got their orders to report to their posts. In no time the yeshiva was empty. There were already boys directly on the Suez Canal and in the Golan holding Yom Kippur services for the חיילים stationed there from before the war broke out. Reb Aron [*sic*] gave a very emotional talk to the Americans, telling us to continue our learning at a maximum level. A בית מדרש was set up in ירושלים for the next day. Monday afternoon we received a special course in stretcher-bearing and in the handling of wounded from the Civilian Defense authorities. In case there is a need we will be called on to help. In the meantime, we have been doing volunteer works, putting up סוכות for families who have fathers & sons in the army, making deliveries, working in factories.

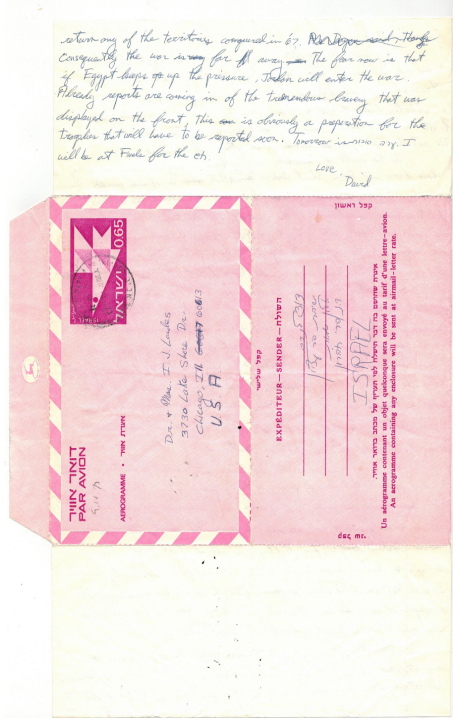
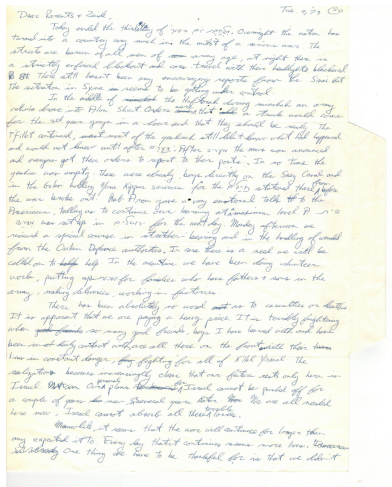
There has been absolutely no word as to casualties or deaths. It is apparent that we are paying a heavy price. It is terribly frightening when so many good friends, boys I have learned with and have been in

² Letter dated August 30, 1973.

daily contact with, are all there on the front with their lives in constant danger, fighting for all of K'llal Yisrael. The realization becomes increasingly clear that our future rests only here in Israel. Our personal plans for Israel cannot be pushed off for a couple of years now or several later. We are all needed here now, Israel cannot absorb all these terrible losses.

Meanwhile, it seems that the war will continue for longer than any expected it to. Every day that it continues means more lives. One thing we have to be thankful for is that we didn't return any of the territories conquered in '67. Consequently, the war is far away. The fear now is that if Egypt keeps up the pressure, Jordan will enter the war. Already reports are coming in of the tremendous bravery that was displayed on the front, this is obviously a preparation for the tragedies that will have to be reported soon. Tomorrow is ערב סוכות. I will be at Fivel's [his great uncle—Y.L.] for the חג.

Love,
David



10.25.73 Sunday 25 ב"ס

Dear Parents & Zaide,

I'm very sorry that I haven't written until now. Everything has just seemed to be happening so fast that I lost all track of time. Everyone was sent reeling from this war. The calamity was so great, that it is still hard to think coherently about it. Today I came back to the yeshiva. The Americans and the few Israelis that weren't drafted have started learning today, but the rest of the yeshiva is still out there and who knows when they'll be able to come back. Coming back to the yeshiva wasn't easy. There are two boys who are known to have fallen in battle, there are wounded and there are also those who have been taken prisoner. The yeshiva won't be the same for a long time. Those two boys who were killed, were on the Suez on Yom Kippur holding

davening's at the outposts there. What is there to say? They were outstanding boys dedicated to Torah & our country, who died defending all of K'llal Yisrael. Their loss is unbearable. Everything changes as soon as you know even one soldier personally. I remember the Six-Day war from back in the States, we heard about the losses, the exact number, but being used to hearing daily the Vietnam deaths made us somewhat callous. As soon as you know even one boy out there fighting, the whole picture is different. You are able to mourn and feel the loss of every boy that was killed. The exact numbers have not as yet been released but it seems that it will be over a thousand killed. Our bitterest nightmares have come true.

The first days of **יום טוב** I was at Fivel's, the last days at Esther's [his great aunt—Y.L.], and this past **שבת** at Yuda's [his great uncle—Y.L.]. Understandably they weren't much of holidays, they were actually more of a burden than anything else. Simchas Torah was very tough, it was just impossible to think about "Simcha" when friends are celebrating the holiday in a tank somewhere in Sinai. The next night I went to Shaare Zedek to visit a boy from the yeshiva who was wounded. Some yeshiva guys were holding second **הקפות** for the wounded there. It was an unbelievable experience. Those wounded who could walk were holding sifrei Torah and dancing. Simple songs like **עם ישראל חי, לשנה הבאה בירושלים הבנויה** suddenly took on a new meaning. It was such a **זכות** to be there.

As I wrote earlier our only future is here. There is not one country in the world who is somewhat understanding to our cause. This war has clearly

shown that anti-Semitism [*sic*] is a global illness. Our only hope is to strengthen Israel with numbers, to make it into as much as an independent country as possible. I expect a visit from you in the near future.

Love,
David

11.7.73 **בס"ד 7 Nov.**

Dear Parents, & Zaide,

Yesterday I spent the whole day traveling. A bunch of us went on a **גמילת חסד** trip to Haifa, Hadera & Netanya. In Haifa we visited a boy from the yeshiva in a hospital there. He was badly burned in a tank and has many shrapnel wounds. He still is not in great shape but he has greatly improved since his first day in the hospital. In Hadera we visited the family of a boy from the yeshiva who fell in battle. In Netanya we also were **מנחם אבל**, again the family of a guy from the yeshiva. Yesterday we heard some shocking news about another one from the yeshiva who has been killed. He was married two months ago. The government just announced the official count of those who were killed in the war, 1,834. It is so impossible to comprehend the tremendous loss. Whole worlds were destroyed in this war. Today the temporary army graveyards are being opened to the families of those who were killed. It won't be easy to recover from the blow...

...Reb Aron and Rav Amital were out in "Africa" [the Western side of the Suez Canal—Y.L.] visiting the troops. Reb Aron said that the platoon leader of the yeshiva guys told him an interesting story. After

the 3rd day of the battle, when the situation was very dangerous, the platoon leader called the guys together to tell them what was happening. He explained to them that the problems were great and that a retreat might be necessary. One of our guys answered, “Yes, we know all that. But we have a real problem. We need a lulav and esrog.”

Love,
David

11.21.73 ב"ס ד' 21st Wed

Dear Parents,

...There was another wedding this week. The first real simchah since the war. The חתן got a three-day leave from the front to get married. The prisoners are coming back, but the two boys from the yeshiva who were missing and whose only hope was that <they> were taken prisoner, were not on the list given over by the Egyptians.

Rav Amital spoke to the yeshiva the other day. He said that we have to look at the war in Messianic terms. What he said was based on three points. First of all, the war was fought by מלכות ישראל, a Jewish state. Second of all, it was a war that affected and continues to affect the whole world in an incomprehensible manner. And third of all the miracles that occurred, were far surpassed those of the other wars. The Torah's vision of ten defeating an army of a thousand was realized. There was no battle in this war that the enemy didn't out-number

³ Our father is referencing here Rav Amital's talk later published as *Li-Mashm'otah shel Milhemet Yom ha-Kippurim* in his *Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim*; see also our father's

us two or three to one. We experienced ישועה (salvation) of immense proportions. That the Arabs with their numbers and arms didn't overrun us the first day is clearly a miracle. Rav Amital went on to say that although our suffering is great, it does not negate our responsibility to rejoice and to give our thanks to G-d. He also mentioned in the talk that once the redemption (גאולה) has started, there are no defeats, only gains. What the immediate purpose of this war we do not know, but that we are on the road of גאולה is certain.³

I'm expecting a visit soon [i.e., from his parents—Y.L.]. One could tell that things are happening here. It's important to be in Israel at this time.

As of yet, the guys have not come back from the front. It might take months.

Love,
David

12.15.73 ב"ס ד' כ' מרחשון

Dear Parents & Zaide,

The other night I went to a wedding of a boy in the yeshiva. It was strange having a wedding in the middle of a period of war. We tried our best to make it “leibedick,” all though practically the whole yeshiva wasn't there. In the middle of the wedding a few of us left to attend an אזכרה for another boy in the yeshiva who was killed in the war. On one hand we were celebrating the biggest Simcha we know of,

reflections on this talk in *Our Roshei Yeshiva*, 25-28. For an English translation of the talk, see now *Tradition* 55:3 (2023).

and on the other hand we were mourning the biggest loss we could have. This is the miracle of Israel (“מלך ממית ומחיה”).

Today will be the first day of the prisoner exchange. We are praying that a couple of boys from the yeshiva who are missing will be among them. They are starting to give one- or two-day leaves and we are getting a chance to see some of the guys again. Above all one thing they do not want is another war.

The following is a story Rav Amital told on the radio motzei Shabbos. It was told to him by a commander of troops from the yeshiva: “The ‘chevrah’ returned from the first battle they’ve ever experienced, a cruel and hard battle in which some of their friends were hit. They were all in a state of shock, it could be no other way. As I was trying to find the words to pull them out of their shock and bring them back to reality, I heard the cry of one soldier, ‘Ma’ariv!’ Suddenly they are all gathering and are praying ‘ברכו את ה’ המבורך,’ and they are davening with intense fervor and meaning.”

Rav Amital also described the meetings he had with the troops: “We met the boys at the different strong points spread out in the sands of the desert. While we were traveling by jeep accompanied by a reserve officer, we met them in the midst of special training. We had some emotional meetings when we surprised our students with our presence. And when we were recognized by them, they jumped from their tanks straight to our arms, unable to express themselves verbally. The place—60 kilometers from Cairo. The scenery—sand dunes and abandoned missile sites. In the immediate

vicinity—Israel tanks, and in the middle of it all—a meeting of brothers, the Rav and his talmidim embracing.”

Love,
David

The following are brief snippets from other letters that our father sent, providing additional details, particularly as the yeshiva began to recover from the war:

11.30.73: “Everything has settled down to a more or less regular routine. The four Israelis that are here who were not drafted for physical reasons are being drafted now to become medics. There will only be two or three Israelis and all us Americans in the yeshiva until the middle of February at the earliest. It gets quite depressing at times, especially on שבת, but the learning isn’t yet suffering..Rav Amital was here שבת and he invited us all into his apartment. He told stories of his trips to the Golan and the Sinai. He told of one man he knows who lost his family in Europe during the Holocaust and came to Israel and remarried and now lost his son during the war. The man said that at least his son was buried like a Jew, we are making some progress..”

1.2.74: “...The guys are still on the front. No sign of them returning any earlier than פסח, at the best. But the learning is continuing on. It seems that Reb Aron might get the U.S. for a month. It seems that the Ministry of Absorption wants to send him to promote aliyah, and it also seems that the yeshivah needs money. His absence would sort of ruin things here in the yeshiva..”

1.15.74: “Last week two boys from the yeshiva who were considered missing in action, were declared as dead. Everyone knew that there was very little chance of them being found alive, but there was always that hope. Now, three months after the war, there are still families who are sitting “shiva.” The wound is still fresh and the nightmare won’t be forgotten for a long time. Daily, there are soldiers of ours who are killed and wounded. It is still felt, especially by those at the front, that the war might suddenly be renewed at any time. In talking to one soldier who gave us a lift, we heard some shocking news. This soldier himself was pretty well despaired by the whole situation. He feels that it’s crazy to put one’s own life on the line at the front now, since most of it will be given back anyway. He said that the police in Jerusalem recently jailed 13 A.W.O.L.’s. They seem to feel that the choice is either sitting on the Syrian border for a year, or sitting in jail for a year and by sitting in jail at least you won’t get killed. This is clearly not the general feeling, but everyone would agree that it is realistic. Just the idea that parts of Judah & the Shomron (including the Gush) might be given back, makes one sick to his stomach. We haven’t sacrificed so many lives so that this would be the result. The Vilna Gaon said that once the “G’ulah’ has started, there is no falling back. Only if we believe that all this is leading up to something, are we to continue living with a purpose. If this is not actually the time of the “G’ulah,” then that means that the Arabs could wipe us off the map tomorrow...Meanwhile, it has gotten very cold out here. The learning is continuing very well.”

1.20.74: “...It still seems very bleak as to when our guys will return. The boys in “Hesder” will most likely be the last ones to be let out. Reb Aron is going to America for three weeks in early February. I don’t see how the yeshiva will get on without him. But meanwhile the learning is continuing strong...”

1.30.73: “...Reb Aron will be leaving for the States on Feb. 12 for 3 weeks. The Foreign Ministry is sending him to promote aliyah and he’ll also be doing work for the yeshiva... The weather is still cold but currently dry. The yeshiva has run out of fuel so there is no heat or hot-water in the dorms. But it is not as yet all that bad...”

2.26.74: “...Some of the guys are starting to come back. There should be quite a few back for Purim. I remember last Purim when I first came to Israel. The tremendous simchah really sold me on the yeshiva. This year no one knows how it is going to be like. On one hand there is reason for an even greater simchah but on the other hand it is impossible to think of dancing and singing in the yeshiva anymore...”

4.24.73: “...The yeshiva now is getting pretty full and some sense of normalcy is returning. Today is Yom Hazikaron (יום הזכרון) Memorial Day for the fallen soldiers. Last night there was an אזכרה at the yeshiva for the eight from our yeshiva who were killed in the war. The place was packed. Rav Amital & Rav Lichtenstein both spoke very well. Tomorrow is Yom Haatzmaut, no wild celebrations this year...”

6.21.73: “...Yesterday was Yom Yerushalayim. We had a חגיגה at night like last year. But this year the yeshiva as a group didn’t go to the כותל in the morning to daven there, because it was felt that after the tragedies that the nation has recently suffered it wouldn’t be right to daven in the streets of Yerushalayim...”

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