
Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

NATURE AND HISTORY are intertwined in the law of "bikurim" (Deut. 26:1-11): In the moment of his joy in the produce of his land, its bountifulness and blessedness, the Jewish farmer expresses his gratitude to God – when offering the first fruits ("Bikurim") in the Temple – by relating the history of his people from its origin to the present. Rather than being confined to the cyclic phenomenon of nature and its fertility, the farmer is taught to appreciate the ongoing history of his people as ordained by God. Instead of delving into his own personal success and his territory's plentifulness, he learns to see himself and his present joy within the context of his people's destiny. His land is not a deity to be worshiped but a divine gift, promised and given by God, to be cherished by honest labor and proper conduct. The law of Bikurim thus elevates man from his subordination to his natural environment, helping him to realize his ties with his past and his dependency on God who is master of both nature and history.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

COSMOLOGY AND HISTORY are intertwined in Jewish holidays. The cyclic festivals of harvest also commemorate the people's birth. Offering "bikurim" (the first of the fruit) before God, the farmer tells the story of his people, from its origins to the moment of his own joy in the land's plenty (Deut. 26:5-10). Cosmology—nature's regulation, its awesomeness and abundance—and history—man's adventure, his effort and achievement—forever capture human fascination and inquiry. Paganism celebrated both, dedicating festivals to the bounty and potency of nature, and also to the might and triumph of man. Judaism differs. Glorifying neither nature nor man, Jewish holidays signify man's liberation from his confinement either to his environment or to himself. They mark man's turning to the One, the source of all cosmic forces and social events.

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

LEBANON (*LEVANON*) was famous in biblical days for its majestic cedars and other precious trees abundantly growing on its lofty hills. Its Hebrew name (from *lavan*, white) reflects the snow on the peak of its mountains. The Phoenicians, crafty merchants who ruled the region, engaged in profitable export of the illustrious and durable cedar wood highly in demand by neighboring states for the building of palaces and temples. Thus, King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem: He effected a peace treaty with Hiram, king of Tyre, who, in turn, provided the cedars of Lebanon. This commodity is what Isaiah had in mind in his prophecy about the "glory" (*kavod*) of Lebanon. In Hebrew, the noun *kavod* stems from the adjective *kaved*, meaning heavy, weighty, and refers in context to the significant, glorious wealth of Lebanon. Envisioning the bright future of Jerusalem, the prophet says (60:13):

*The glory of Lebanon shall come to you,
The cypress, the plane, and the pine;
To bring beauty to the site of My Temple,
And majesty to the place of My Presence.*

As in days of old, so envisions Isaiah, the ultimate glory of Jerusalem will shine through peace, by means of economic and political cooperation with neighboring states. Symbolically, the building materials of the Temple of Jerusalem were the cedars of Lebanon, indicating social and commercial ties between Israel and Lebanon.

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THE PRIVILEGE AND GLORY OF BEING A JEW is articulated by Isaiah in his most poetic address to Jerusalem which envisions her promised restoration (ch. 60): "Arise, shine out, for your light has come." The colorful poem concludes with verses of praise to Jerusalem's returning people (v. 21): "And your people, all of them are righteous! Forever shall they possess the Land. The bud of My planting are they, My handiwork, designed for beauty! The small among them shall become numerous; and the young— a powerful nation. I, the Lord in due time, will swiftly accomplish all these things." Isaiah's pronouncement about the inherent justness of the people, that all of them are righteous (*zadikim*), is taken in rabbinic teaching as the basis for the idea that "All Israel shall have a share in the World-to-Come"—that each and every member of the people is destined to greatness. The term "World-to-Come" in this context may well refer to the days of future redemption as envisioned by Isaiah.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

GRATITUDE, the human sense of appreciation and thankfulness, is the core of the "bikurim" precept (Deut. 26:1-11): offering the first fruit of the harvest before God, and acknowledging Him as the source of all blessings. This idea of gratitude is reflected in the "beracha" system: expressing thanks to God before and after meals and on other occasions of joy and worship. The lingual root of "beracha" is "berech" meaning knee. In antiquity, the act of blessing was mostly performed while kneeling on the ground. The "beracha" – even to-day, when we no longer actually kneel – is a human gesture of respect and reverence: the bowing of the heart before the Creator, uttered in words. This religious attitude to reality develops man's potential of being mindful, alert and attuned to the wonders and marvels of existence. He learns not to take things for granted but to enjoy them with a sense of humility and gratefulness.

Scriptural Reading for
Saturday morning, Sept. 11:
Ki Tavo — Deuteronomy 26:1—29:8
HAFTARAH: Isaiah 60:1—22
Candlelight time 7:28 Sabbath ends 8:18

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK: *Derivations from the Hebrew root word "amor" connote thought and its expression and also leadership and high rank. "Amir" may refer to the top of a tree, summit of mountain, or head of group, a ruler or sovereign. Conveying the meaning of prominence and greatness, the verb "ha'amir", in the causative, appears in Deuteronomy: "Today, you made the Lord your 'amir,' to be your God and walk in His ways" And, "Today, the Lord made you His 'amir', to be His treasured people" (27:9-10). A mutual relationship between God and people is hereby portrayed, a reciprocal acknowledgment. The people are the cause for God's prominence and kingship; they made Him their worshiped God. God is the cause for the people's eminence and greatness; He made them his treasured people. Based on this Scriptural statement is the poetic verse from Selihot; "We are Your 'ma'amirim' (we elevated You) and You are our 'ma'amir' (You elevated us)." The idea of mutuality in the man-God encounter is a leading theme of the liturgy of the Days of Awe (High Holidays). Man is considered and judged by God; God is considered and enthroned by man. This awareness of the I-Thou stance between the Creator and the one created in His image instills in man a deep sense of responsibility and care in weighing his decisions and deeds.*

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

Thought of the Week

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NATURE AND HISTORY are intertwined themes of Jewish holidays. The festivals of harvest also commemorate the people's birth. When the farmer in the days of the Temple would offer his First Fruit (Bikurim: Deuteronomy 26:5-10), he would recite the story of his people, from its origins to the moment of his own joy in the land's plenty—thus combining national and ecological themes in his celebration. In both nature and history we realize the power and supremacy of One God. In both, the Jewish idea of “partnership” between God and humanity is evident: The fields' harvest as well as the people's destiny represent the mystical interaction between Divine Providence and human enterprise. While celebrating nature and history, Judaism glorifies neither—recognizing God as the ultimate source, and the people as “partners” in His creation, with the sacred duty to cultivate nature and advance history—for a better world.

Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

BLESSINGS (Dt. 28:4-5): “Blessed be the fruit of your womb, your soil, and your cattle . . . Blessed be your basket . . . ” First comes the verse on fertility – in the family, field and livestock; then the plenty of food at home. In the corresponding curses, however, the order is reversed (17-18). Rabbi D.Z. Hoffmann (1843-1921) remarks: “When blessing, God begins with the person himself; when cursing, God begins with his possessions. So He also did with Job.”

The essence of the blessing and cursing is to make us aware of the intrinsic correlation between our moral and religious conduct and our success or failure in life. It teaches us to appreciate the gifts of life, taking nothing for granted (47): To worship God “in joy and gladness” rejoicing in nature’s abundance.

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

TO BE "BLESSED IN THE CITY" (Deuteronomy 28:3) entails, according to the Talmud, living close to the synagogue (*Bavli, BM 107a*).

In antiquity, however, synagogues were generally built at the city's outskirts rather than within the residential area. Thus, Rabbi Yohanan explains that this urban "blessing" expressed in the Talmud does not suggest that we actually make our homes adjacent to the public place of worship, but rather that we reside within reasonable proximity to a synagogue; namely, walking distance. Thus, one gets reward not only for worshipping in the synagogue, but also for walking to it. This insightful rule has a potentially significant, social-demographic impact on the shape and spirit of the Jewish community. It promotes social and religious cohesiveness of integrated, close-knit Jewish residential neighborhoods that flourish near a synagogue and encourages people to structure their social and spiritual activities around the synagogue. Thus the synagogue serves its original, triadic purpose as a house of assembly, study and prayer – the focal point of the community's cultural-religious activities. In this way, residing near a synagogue is, indeed, being "blessed in the city!"

Friday, September 7, 1990

WEEK

WORLD NEWS

JUDA

TO BE "BLESSED IN THE CITY" (Deuteronomy 28:3) entails, according to the Talmud (TB BM 107a), living close to the synagogue. This, says Rabbi Yohanan, does not necessarily imply that one should live too close to his place of worship, but within reasonable proximity; walking distance. Then one gets reward not only for worshipping in the synagogue, but also for walking to it. The sociological impact of this Talmudic rule is remarkably constructive: the religious and cultural cohesiveness of the Jewish community, living and prospering within a larger open society, yet evolving around houses of assembly, study and prayer. Thus one is "blessed in the city!" – when one can be fulfilled spiritually and culturally as a unique individual and member of a distinctive group, even while residing in a big and multifaceted city.

Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

TO BE "BLESSED IN THE CITY" (Deut. 28:3) entails, according to the Talmud (BM 107a), living close to the synagogue. According to Rabbi Yohanan, it does not necessarily imply that one should live too close to his place of worship, but within a reasonable proximity -- a walking distance. Then one gets reward not only for worshipping in his synagogue, but also for walking to it.

The sociological aspect of this talmudic rule is the religious and cultural cohesiveness of the Jewish community, evolving around houses of assembly, study and prayer. Only thus is a Jew "blessed in the city!"

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

MAN'S INNATE INNOCENCE is fundamental in Judaism (TB Ber. 60b): "My God, the soul you have implanted within me is pure." True, man is gravely disposed to wickedness and failure (Gen. 8:21): "For the contrivings of man's heart ("yetzer lev ha-adam") are evil from his infancy." But, moral corruption is not the inborn quality of man; it is the perversion of his inherent goodness (Kohelet 7:29): "God made mankind straight; people themselves ask for their countless complexities." Torah's morality is conducive to, and congruent with, real human nature, guiding man to cherish and refine his natural qualities, to guard and unfold his basic humanity, his decency and integrity. Torah is an elaborate design of enlightenment for living human beings, and not an instant device of salvation for the supposedly "doomed." No one is inherently condemned or depraved: Every person has a share in "olam ha-ba" – the promised, redeemed world – unless he deprives himself of it, by misguided attitudes and deeds. This outlook on man's intrinsic purity and divinity is reflected (according to Mishnah, Sanh. 10:1) in Isaiah's vision, in which God, turning to restored Zion, reveals His delight in man, crown of Creation (60:23): "Your people, all righteous, forever flourishing in their land; bud of My planting, My handiwork – to be of glory."

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

"GIVING TO THE DEAD" is part of pagan cults. The tombs of ancient Egypt were filled with articles of decore and food catering to the imagined needs of the dead. Judaism has rejected the veneration of death and the worship of the dead. Food consecrated for the poor ("tithing for the poor") must be given only to the poor, "to the Levite, stranger, orphan and widow," and not be used for any other purpose, not even in honor of the dead – for the mourner's meal or for the purchase of a coffin or shrouds. Concerning this tithing the donor declares (Deut. 26:14): "I gave none of it to the dead." Torah is concerned with giving to the living, providing their needs, enhancing their lives. The urge, however, to give to the dead, so to speak, to worship in honor of the dead, intriguing as it appears, seems to dominate and becloud contemporary Judaism. For many Jews the need to worship, to visit the synagogue, to apply Jewish ritualism, is evoked predominantly in relation to death: attending yizkor, reciting kaddish, keeping yortzeit, etc. Jewish observance becomes then quite handy for coping with the mystery and agony of death. Its insightful approach to bereavement and condolence, to mourning and memorial, is certainly useful and helpful. But Judaism is not just a ritual manual for dealing with death. It is a Torah of Life. It must be lived as a total experience not just applied as remedy in moments of crisis. Torah is for the living.

Candlelight time 7:06 Sabbath ends 7:57

Scriptural reading for Saturday, Sept. 23:

KEE TAVO: Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8

HAFTARAH: Isaiah 60:1-22

September 22, 1978

"GIVING TO THE DEAD" is part of pagan cult. The tombs of ancient Egypt were filled with articles of decore and food catering to the imagined needs of the dead. Judaism has rejected the veneration of death and the worship of the dead. Food consecrated for the poor ("tithing for the poor") must be given only to the poor, "to the Levite, stranger, orphan and widow," and not be used for any other purpose, not even in honor of the dead: for the mourner's meal or for the purchase of a coffin or shrouds. Concerning this tithing the donor declares (Deut. 26:14): "I gave none of it to the dead." Torah is concerned with giving to the living, providing their needs, enhancing their lives. The urge, however, to give to the dead, so to speak, to worship in honor of the dead, intriguing as it appears, seems to dominate and becloud contemporary Judaism. For many Jews the need to worship, to visit synagogue, to apply Jewish ritualism, is evoked mainly if not only in relation to death: attending Yizkor, reciting Kadish, keeping Yortzeit, etc. Jewish observance becomes then quite handy for coping with the mystery and agony of death. Its insightful approach to berevement and condolence, to mourning and memorial, is certainly useful and helpful. But Judaism is not just a ritual-mannual for dealing with death. It is a Torah of Life. It must be lived as a total experience not just applied as remedy in moments of crisis. Torah is for the living.

April 20, 1979

JOY AND JOLLITY are worlds apart; divided, however, by a very thin borderline. In Judaism, joy is the core of religious devotion, essence of earnest worship, source of human strength, backbone of good living. To serve God "with joyfulness and gladness of heart" (Deut. 28:47) is a high goal; to fail to do so, a sorrowful shame. To "rejoice before the Lord" (ibid 12:12) is a sacred duty; to celebrate the marvel of life, the most valued mode of clinging to God. True joy is revealed in dignity, composed with serenity and sobriety, tempered with awe and reverence; remaining far from hilarity and vulgarity. The fence, however, separating sincere joy from base gaiety and trivial joviality is fragile indeed. The holy flame ~~of~~ of enthusiasm may descend into an unholy, "alien fire" (Lev. 10:1). Also, ecstatic joy may appear as coarse clownishness: David's gestures of joyous exhilaration, when he "leaped and danced before the Lord" with consummate abandon and vigor, were not appreciated at all by his wife Michal who deemed them an embarrassing exhibition (II Sam. 6:16). The thin line between the sublime and the grotesque in human joy must neither be trespassed nor misunderstood.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

LIGHT SHINING OUT OF ZION is a splendid facet of Israel's future redemption as envisioned by the prophets. Dramatically addressing the City of Jerusalem, the capital of the people and the land of Israel, personified in endearment as a dearly beloved Woman, (poetically called Zion, a name which indicates her exquisite excellence), the Prophet Isaiah proclaims (60:1-3):

Rise up, spread forth your light,
For emerging is now your light,
And the Lord's glory
Upon you is shining.

For, behold, the darkness covers the earth,
Fogginess beclouds peoples,
But upon you, the Lord shines,
His glory upon you is revealed.

And nations shall walk by your light,
Kings by the radiance of your shine.

Jerusalem is the enduring flame of the Jewish soul,
and its glorious destiny the core of Jewish hope.

Friday, August 30, 1991

E WEEK

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

WHEN AND HOW DID ISRAEL become a nation? Still in the desert, at the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses addressed the whole people of Israel (Deuteronomy 27:9): "Pay attention and listen, Israel! Today you have become a nation (*am*) to the Lord your God." When is "today" in this verse? According to Nahmanides, "today" refers to the day of the sealing of the covenant, on the 40th year in the desert, when the giving of the Torah was formally completed. Then, "on that day," Israel became a nation. Both Hebrew names for nation, *goy* or *am*, are equally titles of honor. In Exodus (19:16) Israel is *goy kadosh*; in Deuteronomy (28:9), *am kadosh*. Both mean: a designated, distinguished (holy) nation.

When a group of people are perceived by themselves and others as a unified, homogeneous and distinctive entity, sharing a history and a destiny, they become, in the biblical sense, a nation. As for the people of Israel, Saadia Gaon (10th c.) expressed its uniqueness in his famous formulation: "We are a nation only by virtue of our (*dual*) Torah – the written and the oral."

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

WHEN AND HOW DID ISRAEL BECOME A NATION? Still in the desert, at the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses addressed the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 27:9): "Pay attention and listen, Israel! Today you have become a nation to the Lord Your God." What is the meaning of "today" in this verse? According to Nahmanides and other sages, "today" refers to the day of the sealing of the covenant, when the giving of the Torah was formally completed. On that day Israel became a nation. The Hebrew for nation is either *goy* or *aam*. In Exodus (19:16), Israel is called *goy kadosh*; in Deuteronomy (28:9), *aam kadosh*. Both mean the same: holy nation. The term *goy* indicates an organic, corporate body (a living political entity); the term *aam* may suggest filial togetherness (*im*) and is related to the term *umma* (nation; close to *imma*, mother, motherhood). Our verse, also Deuteronomic, uses *aam*: Today you have become God's *aam*. Neither of these two terms is better or worse than the other; both are names of honor. When a group of people is perceived by itself and others as a unified entity sharing a history and a destiny, it becomes in the biblical sense a nation. As for the people of Israel, Saadia Gaon expressed its uniqueness in his famous formulation: "We are a nation only by virtue of our Torah."

Thought of the Week —

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

WHAT MAKES JEWS A "PEOPLE" ("AM")? The rabbinic answer is clearcut and unequivocal: the Torah. Still in the desert, only 50 days after being slaves; Jews became a people the day they received the Torah from Sinai—even without a land. After 40 years of wandering, on the eve of their entry to the promised land, they are told (Deut. 27:9): "Heed and listen, O Israel! On this day you have become a people ('am')." The Talmud (Ber. 63b) explains that "on this day" refers to any day of renewed attachment to and encounter with Torah. Torah is dear to its adherents, each and every day, as on the day it was given from Sinai. Constantly and renewedly, Jews are becoming a people only by virtue of Torah.

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

WHEN AND HOW DID ISRAEL BECOME A NATION? Still in the desert, at the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses addressed the whole people of Israel (Deuteronomy 27:9): Pay attention and listen, Israel! Today you have become a nation to the Lord your God.

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Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

WHAT MAKES THE JEWS A "PEOPLE" ("AM")? Tradition and history confirm only one valid answer: the Torah. Moses said to the Israelites (Deut. 27:9), "This day you became a people." According to the Talmud, this day is the day of Matan-Torah, the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. This "day" is eternal; Every day when a Jew studies Torah, he affirms his ties with his Jewish heritage. He relives the experience of Sinai, and retains his identity with the Jewish people, who are "Am Olam"—a people of eternity. eternity.

Thought of the Week

Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

KI-TAVO

August 30 1991

WHEN AND HOW DID ISRAEL BECOME A NATION? Still in the desert, at the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses addressed the whole people of Israel (Deuteronomy 27:9): "Pay attention and listen, Israel! Today you have become a nation (*am*) to the Lord Your God." When is "today" in this verse? According to Nahmanides, "today" refers to the day of the sealing of the covenant, on the 40th year in the desert, when the giving of the Torah was formally completed. Then, "on that day," Israel became a nation. Both Hebrew names for nation, *goy* or *am*, are equally titles of honor. In Exodus (19:16) Israel is *goy kadosh*; in Deuteronomy (28:9), *am kadosh*. Both mean: A designated, distinguished (holy) nation.

When a group of people are perceived by themselves and others as a unified, homogeneous and distinctive entity, sharing a history and a destiny, they become in the biblical sense a nation. As for the people of Israel, Saadia Gaon (10th c.) expressed its uniqueness in his famous formulation: "We are a nation only by virtue of our [*dual*] Torah -- the Written and the Oral."

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THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

KI TAVO

September 15, 1995

WHEN AND HOW DID ISRAEL BECOME A NATION? Still in the desert, at the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses addressed the whole people of Israel (Deuteronomy 27:9): Pay attention and listen, Israel! Today you have become a nation to the Lord Your God. What is the meaning of "today" in this verse? According to Nahmanides and other sages, "today" refers to the day of the sealing of the covenant, when the giving of the Torah was formally completed. Then, on that day, Israel became a nation. The Hebrew for nation is either *goy* or *aam*. In Exodus (19:16) Israel is called *goy kadosh*; in Deuteronomy (28:9), *aam kadosh*. Both mean the same: Holy nation. The term *goy* indicates an organic, corporate body (a living-political entity); the term *aam* may suggest filial togetherness (*im*) and is related to the term *umma* (nation; close to *imma*, mother, motherhood). Our verse, also Deuteronomic, uses *aam*: Today you have become God's *aam*. None of these two terms is better or lesser than the other; both are equally names of honor. When a group of people is perceived by itself and others as a unified entity, sharing a history and a destiny, it becomes in the biblical sense a nation. As for the people of Israel, Saadia Gaon expressed its uniqueness in his famous formulation: "We are a nation only by virtue of our Torah."