

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK: "Thus said the Lord who puts the sun to light daily, the orders of moon and stars to light nightly, who calms the sea when its waves roar, the Lord of Multitudes is His name. 'Were all these laws ever to perish from My presence,' says the Lord, 'only then will the seed of Israel also cease to be a nation always in My presence.' " (Jeremiah 31:35)

The indestructibility of the Jewish people is repeatedly assured in Prophecy. So also: "No tool forged against you will ever succeed." (Isaiah 54:17).

Jeremiah compares the promise of Israel's endurance to the inviolable Divinely ordained laws of nature. The ongoing reality of Israel is elemental to the Divine scheme of creation. As long as the created order exists, the historical phenomenon of Israel is assured.

A new nuance is added by Isaiah. The promise to Israel is unequivocal and irrevocable. "As I swore that no more shall Noah's waters flood the earth, so have I sworn not to vent My wrath and rage on you. Yet, though mountains may vanish or hills crumble, My covenant with you, that of compassion and peace, will never vanish nor crumble." (54:9-10)

The secret strength of the Jewish people is incomparable and inexplicable — a mystery and a challenge.

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

Thought of the Week

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“GOOD” AND “RIGHT” (*Tov and Yashar*): Outlining correct conduct, Torah (Deut. 6:18; 12:28) links these two terms. In one verse the order is: “Do what is *right* and what is *good* in the eyes of the Lord.” In another verse the order is reversed: “Do what is *good* and what is *right* . . .” Torah applies the same modifying phrase “in the eyes of the Lord” to both terms, “good” and “right.” Rabbinic tradition, however, sharply distinguishes between the two, defining “good” as the rules and requirements ordained by God (“good”—in Heaven’s eyes), and “right” as the mores and norms considered decent and proper by people (“right”—in human eyes). The “good” in itself, although divinely ordained, is not sufficient; it is worthless and “bad” if it is not also “right” from a human point of view. Our Sages insist that Divine law must be invested with and measured by humanly recognized standards of “rightness”—of fairness and equity. Only through concern for people, aiming to do what is humanly *right*, can we truly obey God, achieving what is divinely *good*.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

JEWISH INDESTRUCTIBILITY: "Thus said the Lord who puts the sun to light daily, the orders of moon and stars to light nightly, who calms the sea when its waves roar, the Lord of Multitudes is His name: 'Were all these laws ever to perish from My presence, only then will the seed of Israel also cease to be a nation always in My presence.'" (Jeremiah 31:35). The indestructibility of the Jewish people is repeatedly assured in prophecy. So in the haftara: "No tool forged against you will ever succeed." (Isaiah 54:17). Jeremiah compares the promise of Israel's endurance to the inviolable, Divinely ordained laws of nature. As long as the created order exists, the historical phenomenon of Israel is assured. A new nuance is added by Isaiah. The promise to Israel is unequivocal and irrevocable. "As I swore that no more shall Noah's waters flood the earth, so have I sworn not to vent my wrath and rage on you. Yet, though mountains may vanish or hills crumble, My covenant with you, that of compassion and peace, will never vanish nor crumble." (43:9-10). The secret strength of the Jewish people is incomparable and inexplicable--a mystery and a challenge.

Friday, August 25, 1989

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

"DO NOT SLASH YOURSELVES!" (DT. 14:1): Torah forbids self-mutilation. Why? "You are children of God." Created and beloved by your heavenly Father, you must cherish your innate dignity and respect your body. Treat it with care; do not harm or deform it. Self-effacement, common in religious rituals since antiquity, is outlawed in Judaism. Shrine of divinity, the human body is to be revered and enjoyed with responsibility.

Preaching against national disunity and separatism, the sages applied this rule to the social "body" of the Jewish people, viewed as a living organism: "Do not cut yourself into separate fractions!" The fragmentation of the people is like the slashing of a human body. Both the corporeal body of each individual as well as the corporate body of the people must be cherished and kept intact.

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

"DO NOT SLASH YOURSELVES" (*Lo Titgodedu*: Deuteronomy 14:1): "Slashing oneself" – the self-infliction of bodily injury, common in many ancient, and even some current, religious rituals as an expression of human submission before a Divine power – is denounced by Torah: "You are children of God! We are created and beloved by our Father in Heaven. We must treat ourselves – both our souls and bodies – with utmost respect." Torah's ban against "self-slashing" applies to both the physical body of an individual and the political body of the people. The people as a whole is one living organism: "Do not slash yourselves into separate fractions!" Dividing the people is like cutting one's own flesh into pieces. Cherish and protect the integrity of both.

Signs and miracles prove nothing in Judaism (Deuteronomy 13:1-6). They neither confirm nor dispute any idea or law of Torah. Moses was accepted by his people as a true prophet, not because of any signs or miracles he performed. The eminence of a prophet in Judaism is established by the validity of his message, the integrity of his personality, the decency of his conduct; not by dramatics or the magic of his performance.

This immutable position has become a formidable factor in forging the Jews' heroic persistence in their Torah and faith, in spite of harassment by various rival religions.

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

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RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

"LO TITGODEDU!" TORAH FORBIDS self-mutilation (Deuteronomy 14:1): "You are the children of God. (hence) Do not slash yourselves!" Created and beloved by your heavenly Father, you must treat your body with respect. Do not harm or deform it! Self-effacement and self-mutilation were common in religious ritual since antiquity. Not so in Judaism. The gift of life – as well as the gifts of a sound and healthy body – must be treasured. The human body is a shrine of divinity; it must be cherished and enjoyed with responsibility.

In addition to its basic meaning, forbidding the cutting of a person's physical body, the Sages saw in the Hebrew phrase an additional meaning, referring to the whole body of the Jewish people: "Do not cut yourself into separate fractions!" Thus the Sages midrashically read "*lo titgodedu*" to mean: "Do not make (of your people) '*agudot-agudot*' (parties, parties)!"

Fragmenting the Jewish people is like slashing one's own body. The corporeal body of each individual Jew, as well as the corporate body of all Jews, must be zealously kept intact.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

SELF-MUTILATION is forbidden in Jewish law (Deuteronomy 14:1): "You are the children of God: Do not slash yourselves!" Being created and beloved by your Heavenly Father—royal princes—you must treat your bodies with respect. Self-effacement and self-mutilation were common in religious ritual since antiquity. Not so in Judaism. The gift of life must be treasured with awe and gratitude. The body, shrine of divinity, must be cherished and enjoyed with responsibility—not desecrated or abused. The Hebrew phrase *lo titgodedu* literally means, do not cut your bodies. The Rabbis, however, saw in it an additional meaning, referring to the whole *body* of the Jewish people: "Do not cut yourself into separate fractions (*agudot, agudot*)." Since the entire people of Israel is seen as one organism, the biblical phrase contains also a prohibition against national disunity and fractionalization. Protect and do not destroy the integrity of your national as well as personal body. The corporeal body of each individual Jew, as well as the corporate body of all Jews—must be zealously kept intact.

Thought of the Week

Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

RE'EH

August 17, 1990

LO TITGODEDU: "DO NOT SLASH YOURSELVES!" (Deuteronomy 14:1):

"Slashing oneself" -- common in ancient religious rituals as an expression of human submission before the divine in self-mutilation and self-effacement -- is denounced by Torah: "You are children of God!" Created and beloved by our Father in Heaven we must treat ourselves with respect due to royalty; we must neither deform nor harm our bodies. For the human body is a sacred shrine of divinity. In addition to the physical body of the individual, the biblical verse is applied in rabbinic tradition to the political body of the whole people: "Do not slash yourselves *into separate fractions!*" The people as a whole is one living organism. "Slashing" it into separate fractions is like cutting one's own flesh into pieces. Do not violate your own personal body, nor impair the wholeness of your national body, but cherish and protect the integrity of both. Both the corporate body of the entire people as well as the corporeal body of each individual must be kept whole and intact.

Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

ELUL, the name of the sixth month in the Jewish calendar, preceding the sacred Seventh Month of the Days of Awe, is Babylonian, and has a strikingly pagan ring: "Elul" (as the Hebrew "elil") means an idol. "Elul" was introduced into Scripture for the first (and only!) time by Nehemiah in his Diary (6:15), recording that on the 25th of Elul the wall around Jerusalem was completed.

Later mystic homiletics, however, "hebraized" this borrowed word by treating it as an abbreviation of "Ani Le-dodi Ve-dodi Li" ("I am for my Lover and my Lover is for me;" Sg 6:3); allegorically, the words of Israel to God. A most befitting phrase for the month leading to the season of return to God.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

THE SWORD AND THE WORD are two formidable weapons which are waged in the ongoing war against the Jews—physical persecution combined with verbal condemnation. The Jews are an easy target for both—the devastating “tool” and the vicious “tongue” of enemies throughout the ages who seek to utterly destroy them. The Jews, however, unyieldingly persist, miraculously surviving them all, succumbing neither to the swords of annihilation nor to the words of denouncement. This divine quality of eternal immunity against any hostile forces has been promised to the Jewish people in the comforting prophecy of Isaiah (54:17): “No tool designed to fight you shall ever succeed, and any tongue launched to accuse you shall be proven to be false; this is the bequeathed lot of the Lord’s worshippers, their due reward from me, says the Lord.”

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA, performing miracles or foretelling the future, are no "proof" whatsoever for any religious claim or theological doctrine. A truth that does not stand on its own, within the normal order of reality and reason, does not become validated, nor more convincing, just because of some inexplicable or wondrous phenomena conjured by priest or prophet. The veracity or fascination of any idea must not be affected by the charm of mystery or the trick of magic (Deut. 13:1-6): "If a prophet or a dream-visionary arises among you and offers you a sign or a portent – and the sign or portent does come about! – telling you: 'Let us follow other gods whom you do not know and worship them!' – pay no heed to the words of this prophet or dream-visionary. For the Lord your God is testing you to verify whether you do love Him with the completeness of your mind and the wholeness of your being." This attitude singles out Judaism from most other religions in its consistent and persistent non-reliance on the obscure and the occult. The true believer does not rely on miracles: he neither seeks them as a crutch nor fears them as a threat. If they confirm his religion they are a gift; if they challenge it, a test; but never an "argument" for or against it (29:28): "The concealed things (nistarot) are for God; but the apparent (niglot) are for us and our children that we fulfill all the words of this Torah."

Friday, August 28, 1992

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

SIGNS AND MIRACLES prove nothing in Judaism. They neither prove nor refute any idea or law of Torah. Moses was accepted by his people as a true prophet, not because of any signs or miracles he performed. So no one after Moses, regardless of all the signs and miracles he may produce or presume to produce, may expect to be followed if he contradicts even one word of Moses' Torah. The eminence of a prophet in Judaism is established by the integrity of the person and the validity of the message, not by the dramatics of the prophet's appearance or magical performance.

All the wonders and portents, all the demonstrations of supernatural acts, all the specious "proof" of fulfilled predictions, are simply irrelevant for the validation of prophets and prophecies. Signs and miracles are no mark of truth nor reason for faith (Deuteronomy 13:1-6). The natural order is the true and most convincing "miracle" of all.

Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

MIRACLES are no proof for truth; they can neither confirm nor deny any idea or law of Torah. Moses was accepted by Israel, not by dint of any miracles, but because of his mighty acts "before the eyes of all Israel" (Dt. 34:12). Henceforth, Israel would never follow any prophet who presumes to abrogate or supersede Moses' Torah -- regardless of any miracles he may claim. A person's power to perform wonders -- to heal or foretell -- is irrelevant; it provides no evidence of truth and no reason for faith (Dt. 13:1-6).

The authority of a prophet is established in Judaism by the validity of his message and the integrity of his conduct, not by the drama of his appearance or personality. This attitude has forged the Jews' heroic survival in the face of constant and fierce harassment by rival religions.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

SIGNS AND MIRACLES prove nothing in Judaism. They neither confirm nor deny any idea or law of Torah. Moses was accepted as a true prophet, not because of any signs or miracles he performed. No prophet after him should be followed if he contradicts even one word in Moses' Torah, regardless of all the signs and miracles he may produce. The eminence of a prophet in Judaism is established by the validity of his message and the integrity of his conduct, not by the dramatics of his appearance or the magic of his performance. All his wonders and portents, claims of supernatural acts and fulfilled predictions are just irrelevant (Deut. 13:1-6). Signs and miracles are no mark of truth or reason for faith. This view helped to forge Jews' heroic persistence in their faith and heritage, in spite of constant harassment of rival religions.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

“SON OF GOD” is the title given in the Torah to each and every Jew (Deut. 14:1). A Jew must therefore cherish his dignity and uniqueness in inner purity as well as outward appearance. This concept of sonship to God adds an additional dimension of distinction to the universal idea of man born in the image of God. It expresses the privilege of being part of the Jewish people, the people of God. This term, “son of God,” certainly has no literal geneological meaning. It is a poetic-symbolic expression of a close relationship of mutual love and endearment. In Jewish prayer we address God as “Avinu,” our Father. We appeal to Him to show compassion to His people “as a father to his son.” We aspire to relate to Him as a son to his father.

Friday, August 13, 1993

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

“OPENING THE HAND” is a biblical idiom for offering help: “Do not harden your heart, nor shut your hand against your needy brother, but open your hand widely to him!” (Deut. 15:7-8). Ironically, however, we commonly associate the imagery of an open hand with the beggar, not the giver. Torah, by contrast, upholds the human dignity of all: Let not the poor man become a beggar! You, therefore, must initially and generously open your hand to him, making your help ready and open. In talmudic society, a typical donor would stand at the entrance of his home with his open hand (containing goods) stretched forth; the poor passerby, in anonymity, could pick and take from it whatever he needed without begging (*Mishna Shabbat* 1:1).

Friday, August 9, 1991

THE WEEK

By ~~RABBI ZVI~~ YEHUDA

“OPENING THE HAND” is a biblical idiom for offering help (Deut. 15:7-8): “Do not harden your heart, nor shut your hand against your needy brother, but widely open your hand to him!” Ironically, however, the imagery of an open hand is commonly associated with the beggar, not the giver; the poor ones being compelled to beg with their own open hands. Torah, in contrast, upholds the human dignity of all: Let not the poor become beggars! You, therefore, must initially and generously open your hand to them, making your help ready, accessible and available.

A typical donor, in Talmudic society, would stand at the entrance of his home with his open hand (containing goods) stretched forth; the poor passerby, mostly in anonymity, could pick and take from it whatever was needed, without having to beg (see *Mishna Shabbat* 1:1). In providing alms to the needy, the dignity of the recipients must be upheld. Before the needy person is compelled to outstretch a hand to beg, the donor must “open his hand” to give.

Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

"OPENING THE HAND" is a biblical idiom for offering help (Deut. 15:7-8): "Do not harden your heart, nor shut your hand against your needy brother, but widely open your hand to him!" Ironically, however, the image of an open hand is commonly associated with the beggar not the giver.

Torah, in contrast, upholds the human dignity of all: Let not the poor become a beggar! You, therefore, must initiate the act of opening your hand to the poor, making your help ready and open. In talmudic society, a typical donor, would stand at the entrance to his home, with his open hand (containing goods) stretched forth; the poor passer-by, in anonymity, could pick and take from that hand whatever he needs, without begging (Mishna Shabbat 1:1).

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

POVERTY is a social ill that man is duty-bound to combat and remedy. Moses explains (Deut. 15:11): "In order that the poor in the land shall not perish, therefore I order you, saying: 'Amplify open your hand to your brother, the needy and poor in your land.'" The common translation, "For the poor shall never cease out of the land," is a grave distortion: It reads into this verse a supposed Divine confirmation of poverty and its inevitability in the social order; it treats it as if it were a decree that poverty is here to stay. This non-Judaic theological attitude defies man's earnest effort to deal with poverty on a human level compassionately and effectively. Torah clearly teaches otherwise. Its Divine design, outlined in its whole legacy, is that poverty must be totally eliminated, the ideal state being a society providing for all (v. 4): "For there will be no poor among you – as the Lord will bountifully bless you in the land which He gives you as your possession – if only you heedfully obey the Lord your God, to cherish and implement this entire legacy that I enjoin on you today." Torah's laws in support of the poor are preventive, preparing for the ideal state when they are needed no more. As long as poverty plagues us – the will of God not yet done – we must graciously uphold the poor, lest they 'perish.' But, eventually, when the moral-social order of Torah is fully implemented – the will of God truly fulfilled – there will be no poor.

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

POVERTY – WILL IT EVER BE ABOLISHED?

A Deuteronomic verse (15:11) is often quoted as scriptural “proof” that poverty is here to stay. It is commonly translated: “For the poor will never cease to be in the land!” This idea, however, that poverty – this social-economic injustice of human deprivation – is Divinely ordained and humanly irreparable, is un-Jewish. Judaism, to the contrary, urges us to deal with poverty and not to rely on the miraculous or the supernatural in our

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human efforts to eliminate poverty. The verse, better translated, says:

In order that the poor shall not perish away from the land (by hunger and misery), therefore I command you: Generously open your hand to your needy and poor brother in your land.

The abolishment of poverty is within our human responsibility and ability; this is doing, not defying, God’s will. Then, as stated in the very same Deuteronomic source (v.4): “There shall be no poor among you!”

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

POVERTY—Will it ever be abolished? According to Samuel (Talmudic sage of the 3rd Century), even in the Messianic Era, poverty may still prevail (Shabbat 63a). “For there will never cease to be poor in your land” (Deut. 15:11). This verse does not at all state that poverty must always be with us. It does, however, urge man to deal by himself with the complexity of poverty and not delegate it to any Divine solution; for as long as we allow it, poverty is here to stay. Man must not rely on any miraculous intervention to do for him what he himself must do. Torah charges man with the duty to care for the poor and constantly to seek means to eliminate poverty. The verse may also be understood: “In order that the poor in your land shall not perish away (or shall not be lacking), I order you: “Generously open your hand to your brother, your poor and your needy in your land.”” Working for betterment, man must strive for and anticipate a society where poverty is no more: “There shall be no poor among you” (v.4).

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

IS POVERTY HERE TO STAY? The way an oft-quoted verse (Deut. 15:11) is commonly translated – “For the poor shall never cease out of the land” – the verdict seems gloomy: Yes, alas, poverty is unavoidable and unsolvable. This is contrary to the Jewish view. In the very same context (v. 4) there is a promising outlook: “Indeed, there shall be no poor among you.” The same Hebrew term “evyon” (“needy”) for poor is used in both verses. The elimination of poverty is a non-utopian prospect, achievable by the efforts of the people doing the will of God (Rashi). Without human concern and involvement – without the curbing of greed and apathy and the fostering of compassion and creativity – poverty will not disappear miraculously. Even in the Days of Messiah, so insists Shemuel (Sha. 63a), society will still have to cope with the scourge of poverty, help the poor and work for the eradication of poverty. A better translation of the above quoted verse (v. 11) is: “In order that the poor in your land shall not perish in misery, therefore I order you: “Generously open your hand to your brother, afflicted and needy, in your land!”” But, once you structure your society fully according to the will of God, then (v. 4) “Indeed, there shall be no poor among you.”

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

POVERTY—can it be abolished? Based on a phrase from Torah (Duet. 15:11), commonly (and awkwardly) translated “For the poor shall never cease out of the land (“lo yehdal”), it is claimed that poverty is ordained by God to always stay with us. This notion, which tends to hamper human efforts to eliminate poverty, takes the biblical phrase out of context. The whole verse really says that poverty is solvable; it is our duty to deal with it and abolish it. Urging the people to fight poverty, to care for the poor and help them become self-supporting, Torah says: “In order that the poor amid your land should not perish :or, be left helpless; “lo yehdal”), I, therefore, ordain you: Open your hand wide to your brother, the poor and needy in your land!” It is your human duty to get rid of poverty, by helping the needy to live in dignity, and not delegate the solution of poverty to God. Even in the Messianic Age, poverty will not suddenly and miraculously disappear. You must constantly cope with it and solve it by human means, teaches Torah, because that is “doing the will of God”—Then “there shall be no poor among you!” (v. 4; Shabbat 63a).