

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

R'EI 5784

On the opening verse in the Parsha (11:26), the Torah states, "See, I (ANOCHI) present (NOTEIN) before you today (HAYOM), a blessing and a curse." Let us reflect upon a few questions raised by the Vilna Gaon (Iturei Torah, D'varim, p. 81). He asks:

(1) Why does the text employ the word ANOCHI for "I" and not the more common word, ANI?

(2) Why is the verb NOTEIN in the grammatical present? Were not the mitzvot already given forty years earlier? And

(3) why stress that the commandments, the object of the "blessing and curse", are conferred upon the people, HAYOM, today?

To these questions, the GR"A offers a remarkable worldview which addresses the difficulty a person faces when, with the advent of the month of Elul, he is enjoined to begin the process of T'shuva and struggle mightily with its implementation.

To begin with the second question first, we note the following: There is a nasty tendency for a person, burden by past transgressions, to conclude that he is incapable of changing his previous sinful habits. His life is deemed worthless, spoiled and

squandered. Thus, the Torah states, NOTEIN; just think of the present. Do not take some perverse satisfaction in the fact that, mired in past behavior, it makes little sense to try and improve. The imperative implicit in the word NOTEIN, asserts that man, notwithstanding whatever may have occurred, always has a choice. And now is the time to make that choice and reject past errant behaviors and make a new start.

On this first observation of the Gaon, we may add this clever tactic employed by the yetzer hara to derail us. Not only should we not allow our past misdeeds to discourage and deter us from improving, but we should also not permit our past missed opportunities to do likewise. Many experience intense distress when reflecting on the many times a certain initiative, a promising possibility was fretted away for all the wrong reasons. Here too, the Gaon would no doubt advise: NOTEIN, just focus and attend to the present. The popular adage, not to "cry over spilt milk" is more than apt. To believe that missed opportunities means that you're an abject failure is to fall into the clutches of the yetzer hara and become paralyzed in what you believe to be an inexorable past of sins of commission and omission.

Of course, it is certainly necessary to investigate one's past in order to effectively and successfully move

beyond, but to drown in past defeats is a treacherous ploy of the yetzer hara. Indeed, what a sad commentary on a life that should always hold out the potential of a refreshing renewal and yet feels imprisoned by the mistakes and misses of yesterday!

Secondly, to the third question and pursuant to the GR"A's point above, the inclusion of the word HAYOM, comes to drive home the ever-resilient hope and strong faith that, as the well-known cliché has it, "Today should be the first day of the rest of your life." Again, a person must never allow his past - whether it be filled with sins of commission or omission - to hang like the proverbial "albatross around his neck" preventing him from moving forward with his life. The GR"A puts it quite clearly. If, as Chazal state (D'varim, Sifrei 58) that the mitzvot should be as new to you as if you heard them today, then your life should be no different. One who truly repents, says the Gaon, is comparable to a convert who begins his life anew as a newborn (Y'vamot 22a).

There is another insight explaining the inclusion of the word HAYOM, one which offers a very different take on the emphasis of today. There is a clever fanciful tale told about some of the henchmen of the Satan who are arguing about the best way to entice man to sin. One suggestion was to convince him to steal. After all,

everyone covets and wants something they don't have. "No", responds the group. People who steal are often caught, and because of the anticipated penalties and punishments, not many will be ready to transgress such a sin. Another proposal was to urge people to lie. Most people are uncomfortable with the truth; it's painful and embarrasses them. They will certainly end up fibbing. Again, the group rejects this possibility as well. People are afraid to lie because it might ruin their reputation; it'll put them to shame.

Round and round, more suggestions were offered and all were vetoed until one little devil made a proposal to which everyone unanimously agreed. He said: "Convince everyone to perform acts of kindness and charity, to forgive and be merciful to others. But... tell them to do it all... tomorrow!"

The common cliché, "Don't put off to tomorrow what you can do today" is a truism that best sums up this additional reason explaining why the Torah emphasizes HAYOM. Of course, Chazal put it far more sharply and succinctly when they stated: "If not now, when!" (Avot 1:14). Do what you can do today and begin the T'shuvah process even with the smallest of deeds. What begins HAYOM translates into major accomplishments in the long-term. Attend to the seemingly trivial mistake. Look

for the new opportunity regardless of age, health or knowledge. It must all begin with HAYOM.

And now, to address the first question, the Gaon maintains that with the use of ANOCHI, HaShem assures the troubled Jew that in his contending with his yetzer hara, He will be there to help him overcome and vanquish those toxic temptations that resist any meaningful character and religious betterment. As the Talmud pledges (K'dushin 30b), even as the Evil Inclination arises to overwhelm a person every day, HaShem remains forever present to prevent the yetzer hara from succeeding.

Rav Soloveitchik, in his brilliant analysis of the Aseret HaDibrot, explains there (Sh'mot 20:2) why HaShem introduces Himself as ANOCHI, as opposed to ANI. When employed, ANI requires a grammatical predicate, "I went shopping"; ANI cannot stand alone. ANOCHI, however, is a statement of identity, all of its own, "It is I!" When HaShem spoke with Israel for the first time at Sinai, He said, "It is I, ANOCHI! You know Me. I was with you in Egypt; I was with you at the Splitting of the Sea. We know each other. ANOCHI!

So too, banking off the insight of the GR"A, the Torah is telling the Jew that in his interminable battle against the yetzer hara, a person is never

alone! HaShem, as ANOCHI, stands to both protect and support the frail Jew, enabling him to overpower the Evil One and emerge better and greater!

Such is the encouragement we all need and seek as we begin the arduous, but necessary, task to seriously introspect and engage in genuine T'shuva - repentance. 🙏