



Yahadut Zmaneinu, Moreshet Ha'am

# YOZMA

AN ISRAELI JEWISH INITIATIVE IN MODI'IN



## From the Rabbis

If you were to look up into the night sky you would see the exquisite full moon of the month of Elul – the month in which we recite Selichot, the traditional prayers of forgiveness. Elul is a month of Tikkun ; it is a time for a much-needed annual tune-up of the human "software" within us all.

Elul is the month of repentance and as we approach the end of Elul we reach a state of mind that allows for consolation. This is the final month of the Jewish year which offers us a last chance to take a good hard look at what was done, as well as what was not over the past year. Elul offers us a final opportunity to correct and to complete the mistakes of the past year and to prepare for the New Year. How do we achieve this? By looking at our relationships and interpersonal bonds and by assessing our obligations and commitments each year anew.

The weekly Torah portions in the Book of Deuteronomy, the fifth and final book of the Torah, deal with one of the basic tenets of Judaism – the concept of free will. God turns to the people of Israel saying:

הָאֵה, אֲנִי כִי נִתֵּן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם: בְּרָכָה, וְקִלְלָה.  
אֶת-הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְעוּ, אֶל-מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם...  
וְהַקִּלְלָה, אִם-לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, וְסָרְתֶם  
מִן-הַדֶּרֶךְ, אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you shall hearken unto the commandments of Adonai your God...; and a curse, if you shall not hearken unto the commandments of Adonai your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day (Deuteronomy 11:26)

According to the Lubavitch Rabbi, the use of the expressions "anochi" (I) and "notain" (set before) - as in the passage above - usually convey a blessing and a sense of the sublime. The use of the phrase "anochi" in the first of the Ten Commandments:

"I am the Lord your God..."  
אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךְ..

is just one example. Thus, there would seem to be a dilemma between the blessings that are given to the nation and the curse that is an integral part of this package. Can a curse or an evil actually be something good?

In order to understand this, we must delve a bit deeper into the reason behind the giving of the blessing and the curse – or in other words, into the very reasons why good and evil exist. What was evil created for? Why is there a force counteracting all that is good? The reason behind the existence of evil would seem to lie in the concept of free will. If there were only good in the world and humans did not have the possibility or the inclination to do evil, they would not choose to do good, but rather be forced to do so in the absence of any other option. In order to have free will, there must be two options from which to choose: good and evil. Only thus, are we able to choose our path freely.<sup>1</sup> The concept of choice in our daily life is tremendously important – indeed, it is one of human being's most basic virtues. Reward and punishment are based upon it. Without choice, there is neither cause for reward nor justification for punishment.<sup>2</sup>

In Ezekiel (33:12) we find reinforcement of this theory whereby human free will determines our fate:

צִדְקַת הַצַּדִּיק לֹא יִצְדֵּק בָּהּ אֶתֶּם בְּן אָדָם אֲמַר אֱלֹהֵי בְנֵי עַמְּךָ  
יִקְשָׁל בָּהּ תִּצְלִינוּ בַיּוֹם פְּשָׁעוֹ וְרָשָׁעַת הַרְשָׁע לֹא  
בָּהּ בַיּוֹם שׁוּבוּ מִרְשָׁעוֹ [וְצַדִּיק לֹא יִכָּל לְחַיּוֹת  
יְחַטְּ אֶתוֹ].

And you, son or daughter of the first human, say unto the children of your people: The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression; and as for the wickedness of the wicked, they shall not stumble thereby in the day that they turn from their wickedness; neither shall he that is righteous be able to live thereby in the day that they sin.



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Modern Hebrew poetry deals with this topic just as well as the classic texts. The late Yonah Wallach's poem "The Life You Have" also offers a kind of preparation for the month of Elul - a chance to look within ourselves, to choose between good and evil, between a blessing and a curse.

She writes:

The life you have  
Is the life that you have lived  
Look back with understanding  
Find your point of genesis  
Your creation  
Then create for yourself  
That is the best world  
The one and only world  
That you can create  
Because it is inside you  
Discover it  
Begin at the beginning  
Look at your life  
As a bad lesson  
Look at what has been  
As a punishment  
A suspension  
A time-out in the corner  
A knockout in the first round  
And repair it  
As one who has recovered  
As one who has been sick

As in the Yom Kippur liturgy, composed in 12th century France, describes how the bells toll:

לְבָרִית הַבֵּט וְאֵל תִּפְּן לַיָּצֵר

Look, therefore, to the covenant, and pay no attention to the accuser

Let us all repent today – let us look at the fellowship that we share, at the mutual responsibility that we bear and strengthen this covenant – for ourselves and for those who will follow in our footsteps!

Shana Tova,

Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon and Rabbi Nir Barkin  
*Kehillat* YOZMA, Modiin, Israel.

[1] שולחן השבת, מתוך שיחותיו של הרבי מליובאוויטש, עמ' 344  
[2] שם, עמ' 345