THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

A Message for the Entire Team

All beginning students of Torah face this obstacle: in their original, the primary texts of our Jewish tradition have no punctuation. There are neither commas nor periods in the Torah scroll, the *Sefer Torah*. There are no question marks, nor are there indications of where one paragraph ends and another begins in standard editions of the Talmud.

In recent years, publishers have included vowels and punctuation marks in the new editions of almost all basic Jewish texts. This innovation has facilitated the ability to study Torah unimpeded by the necessity to puzzle over the various quandaries with which students of previous generations had to cope.

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However, before these innovations and throughout our history, there have been numerous disagreements as to how the unpunctuated texts should be read. Let me provide one example of such a text from the Torah portion which we will read in the synagogue on the first day of the upcoming festival of *Shavuot*. The text is to be found in the book of *Exodus*/*Shemot* 19:5-6. Unpunctuated, and translated literally, it reads as follows:

And now if you listen will listen in My voice and keep My covenant and you will be for Me a treasure among all the nations for Mine is all the land and you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy people...

Many commentators struggle with the above verses. Permit me to introduce you to one of them. His name was Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, and he lived in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He was the dean, or *Rosh Yeshiva*, of the "mother of all *yeshivos*," in the town of Volozhin in Lithuania. He is known as the *Netziv*, based upon the initials of his name. He wrote prolifically and gave daily lectures on each week's Torah portion. Those lectures formed the basis of his profound and extremely insightful five-volume commentary, entitled *Haamek Davar*.

As one becomes familiar with his work, one begins to realize that the author uses certain basic themes, again and again, to resolve a wide variety of textual problems.

One of these themes is the distinction between passages directed to an exclusive audience, versus passages which are addressed to all of the Jewish people, and occasionally to all mankind.

To put it bluntly, some messages are for the spiritual superstars, and others are for the entire team.

The *Netziv* suggests that our text can be punctuated in two different ways: one with a message for the elite, and another with a message for us all. In this column, I will confine myself to the message for the broader group and leave the message for the aristocracy to those willing to consult the *Haamek Davar* on their own.

Here is the *Netziv*'s suggested punctuation, with his interjected interpretive remarks, as addressed to the group he calls the *hamon am*, the "masses," or as I prefer, the "entire team," all who stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

And now if you listen well ***in*** My voice, and keep My covenant, ***then, and only then***, will you be My treasure, among all nations, for people of all lands are Mine. You are qualified to serve as My kingdom of priests/servants, you are qualified to be a holy people…

The *Netziv* proceeds to elaborate upon the message:

"From this moment forward, you must 'listen to My voice.' That is, you must ponder Torah and attempt to understand it precisely. 'Listen ***in***,' rather than merely 'listen ***to***.' This is a precondition for My divine support of your national interests, your political agenda, matters of war and peace.

"Then, you must 'keep My covenant', the

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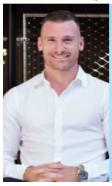
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covenant I made with Abraham regarding sacrificial worship, the *Avodah*, in the Holy Temple. This is a precondition for My divine sustenance, providing you with a fertile land, with abundant food and nourishment.

"But note," continues the *Netziv*, "that reference is only made to *Torah* and *Avodah*, to Torah study and ritual observance! What about *gemilut chesed*? What about interpersonal relationships, charity, kindness, generosity, tolerance, compassion? I, the Almighty, expect those behaviors of all human beings, not just of you! Remember Sodom, totally destroyed because it neglected the poor and needy. Furthermore, I know that *chesed*/compassion comes naturally to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I need not stipulate that it is a precondition for My divine rewards.

"Beyond those two essentials, *Torah* and *Avodah*, without which there is no nation of Israel, you may elevate yourself yet higher by becoming exemplary in your relationships with others, by acting nobly in your dealings with others. But, when it comes to human relationships, much depends upon the special circumstances of time and place. In those matters, you must strive to discern My will, you must attempt to determine what the Almighty expects of you. For that, you must be a *mamlechet kohanim*, a 'kingdom of priests.'

"And then, you must be a *goy kadosh*, 'a holy people.' You must be able to determine for yourselves what makes for holiness in new and unfamiliar contexts which are not explicitly regulated in My Torah. You must ask what I, the Almighty, would want you to do in unprecedented and unanticipated new circumstances, which you are sure to encounter in your national and personal futures."

What a powerful message these words have for us as we enter *Z'man Matan Torateinu*, the Festival of Shavuot, when we not only commemorate the Almighty's revelation upon Mount Sinai, but when we relive it.

The *Netziv* reminds us of the fundamental requirements that we have as a people and as individuals: Torah study and ritual observance. He reminds us that we have responsibilities, not just as Jews, but as members of the human society. He urges us to go beyond those universal responsibilities and to excel morally and ethically.

Chag Sameach ■

May the Torah learned from this issue of TT be in loving memory and לע"נ our dear parents whose 10th & 30th yahrzeits are observed in Sivan

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