



## Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

### Postseason Tears: Sadness or Joy?

This is not about the Cleveland Indians. Promise.

Ezzie Goldish

There is a popular idea that the month of Marcheshvan received the first part of its name since it contains no holidays, and therefore is “mar,” or bitter. While this is historically inaccurate, as detailed wonderfully by former Clevelander and YI member Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky,<sup>1</sup> perhaps this idea reminds us that there is more depth to our calendar than merely marking time.

As our calendar leads us from one season to the next, our commemorations and obligations provide us with opportunities to work on our personal as well as our communal identities; to be interactive as well as introspective. These ebbs and flows constantly balance one another out, not allowing us to stray too far one way or the other, keeping us grounded while allowing room to experience and integrate this full range of emotions, lifestyles, and approaches into our daily lives. We will soon begin to hunker down on our own for the winter, so we emphasize the power of the individual, reminding ourselves of what we can accomplish on our own. First comes Kislev, when Chanukah begins, highlighting the power of the few, championing the heroic actions of individuals such as Yehuda the Maccabee and Yehudit. We light candles from the comfort of our own homes for any who pass by to see, reminding each person of how just one light could last for eight days. This idea carries us through the long nights at home during Tevet, before we turn toward Shevat and the *Rosh Hashanah L’Ilanot*, the New Year for trees, and begin to sow the seeds for the future – a stark reminder what one little seed, or person, can become.

Next comes Adar, when we experience all of these elements within a day: We go from the Fast of Esther – commemorating Esther’s request that the **community** come together and fast, even as she **ruminates** about her own role prior to performing her brave **individual** act – into the alcohol-assisted joyous feast of Purim. We are also obligated to reach out and **interact** with one another (albeit as individuals), sending foods from friend to friend and giving presents to those in need, beginning the process of reconnecting to one another.

As Nissan comes and spring begins, we come outside of our homes and start moving back toward one another, but in full communal form. We celebrate the birth of our nation. We don’t merely **give** the poor man what he needs as we do on Purim; we start our Pesach *sefer* by inviting him to **join** us. In Iyar, over the course of *sefirah*, we take a step back and mourn those 24,000 students who could not get along and we stress the need to respect one another and build unity.<sup>2</sup> We can then go into Sivan together and accept the Torah – as a nation.

As summer heats up and tensions can rise, Tammuz and the first half of Av are somber reminders of what happens when we fail to maintain this sense of community. When we have *sinat chinam* and lose our status as an *am echad*, one unified nation, God punishes us and leaves our fates in the hands of our enemies. We can lose everything, and be left alone,

devoid of one another and of God’s presence in our midst. We lament this loneliness on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, crying out “איכה ישבה בדד”: How can it be that [the city] sits alone?!<sup>3</sup>

But we are then quickly reminded that it need not be this way. Tu B’Av celebrates a number of joyous events, many of which have to do with unity. It is the day when marriage between members of different *shevatim* became permissible; when the other tribes welcomed back the Tribe of Binyamin after the incident at Gibeah; and of course, when the *b’nos Yerushalayim*, the unmarried maidens of Jerusalem, would don white garments, dance in the vineyards, and single men would turn there to search for their future wives<sup>4</sup> – hopefully creating a relationship imbued with God’s presence. This then brings us to Elul, which is a time for introspection. As we work on our relationships, both interpersonal and with God – an effort embodied in the words “אני לדודי לי ודודי לי”<sup>5</sup> – we are prompted to take stock and determine what we can do to build on the relationship, and what we should strive to do better.

We have just completed the month of Tishrei, which serves as the start of the year. On Rosh Hashanah, we accepted God’s Kingship over ourselves both personally and communally, with joy and blessings for a sweet new year. We then spent the next week focusing on *teshuvah*, coming to a climax on the Yom Kippur, the Day of Repentance. On that day, the *Kohen Gadol* would pray for the Jewish nation and we each pray for ourselves as individuals. From Sukkos through Simchat Torah, we continue to bridge the communal and the personal, culminating in a communal celebration of the Torah while also ensuring that every male receives his own individual *aliyah* on that day. Tishrei serves as a bridge, transitioning us from the communal to the individual, just as the season begins to dictate we move ourselves indoors and away from others.

Marcheshvan recognizes this and allows us to embrace it. As the days of fall shorten and we begin to feel isolated, we can comfort ourselves in the knowledge that this is but a part of a larger calendar. We may have less time to gather, we may miss the joyous times of Sukkos and Simchat Torah, but it is also an opportunity to take stock. Soon will come Kislev to remind us of what we can accomplish ourselves, and Nissan to once again turn us into one nation... and then Sivan to get the Torah as one, and Av to remind us both of what can go wrong and what can go right.

Whatever we are going through, be they ups or be they downs, it is all part of a larger plan designed to strengthen us as individuals, to bring us closer together as a community, and ultimately to bring us closer to God both personally and as a people. As we exit the *yomim tovim* and move into the winter, may it be the will of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* that we be able to find and maintain a sense of balance in our lives.

<sup>3</sup> Megillas Eichah 1:1

<sup>4</sup> Ta’anit 30b

<sup>5</sup> “I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me” – Shir Hashirim 6:3. There is a tradition that understands the word “Elul” (אֵלּוּל) as an acronym for this phrase; see, for instance, Bach on Orach Chaim 581 s.k.2.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ou.org/jewish\\_action/10/2012/whats-the-truth-about-mar-cheshvan/](https://www.ou.org/jewish_action/10/2012/whats-the-truth-about-mar-cheshvan/)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aish.com/h/o/33o/91684314.html>

## Text Messages in Tanach

Sarah C. Rudolph

We all know the potential, in our age of email and texting, for the written word to be misunderstood in its tone. I still remember getting into an email argument with a friend when I was 17, before there were emojis to help smooth things out, because of one such misunderstanding.

If we go back to history even more ancient than my high school years (©) (See how useful they are?), we find that not much has changed under the sun: Even in Tanach, written words are often subject to different readings depending on what tone one ascribes to the speaker.

Take, for instance, the story of Gidon in Shoftim Chapter 6.

When we first meet Gidon in 6:11, he is threshing wheat in a winepress. Why there, instead of in a granary? The pasuk explains that he was trying to avoid Midianite raiders who had been terrorizing the Jews and stealing their food (see Verses 1-6). Armed with that information, consider the following exchange:

**12** And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him: 'The LORD is with you, mighty man of valor.'

**13** And Gideon said to him: 'Oh, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where are all His wondrous works which our fathers told us of, saying: Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt? but now the LORD has cast us off, and delivered us into the hand of Midian.'

(Translation modified from JPS 1917 version at [www.mechon-mamre.org](http://www.mechon-mamre.org))

Imagine Gidon, brought so low as to be hiding in a winepress to thresh his wheat, hearing a stranger (later pesukim indicate he did not know it was an angel) hail him with "G-d is with you!" and call him a "mighty man of valor." What sort of emotional response might that provoke? Yehuda Elitzur, in the *Daat Mikra* commentary, points out that hearing the phrase "Hashem is with you!" – though it was simply a standard greeting of the time (see Rut 2:4) – and being called a "mighty man of valor" would likely have been "a painful contrast to the low situation and lack of salvation of one who is threshing wheat in a winepress."

But still, even with the clear pain coming through Gidon's words, the slant of that pain is less clear. My students, when we first read Verse 13 together, took Gidon's response as sarcasm: "Oh, really? G-d is with me? Then what am I doing here; why isn't He performing miracles to help me thresh my wheat in peace instead of living in fear of these Midianites?! I'm a mighty man, am I?!" (Sometimes extra punctuation can do the job of emojis; alas, Tanach leaves that out as well.)

Metzudat David, however, portrays Gidon differently:

**בקש ממנו להשיבו על דבריו, ואמר לו: וואם אמת שיש ה' עמנו, למה אם כך מצא אותנו הרעה?**

**He requested of him to answer him** about his words, and said to him, "If it is true that Hashem is with us, why then has this evil befallen us?"

In Metzudat David's wording, Gidon doesn't sound so angry and sarcastic, mocking the greeting with a rhetorical question. Rather, it is a real question: he is **asking for an answer**. Gidon is not angry; he is sad, yet hoping against hope that there could be an explanation for his nation's predicament and that Hashem might indeed yet be with them.

This ambiguity in tone continues through most of their dialogue, which might lead a reader to wonder: Why would a prophetic text preserve such a lack of clarity? Of course, the question extends way beyond our example. Often, the notion of "70 faces of the Torah" can feel overwhelming; many students of Tanach would rather identify one "right" explanation, and wonder why things couldn't have been stated more clearly. While there are many approaches to the general question, I think our example has specific insight to offer, as it highlights the fine line between two very different types of reactions.

With the very same words, Gidon may have been expressing either anger and derision or a beseeching hope out of the depths of his pain. It is a short distance from one to the other, and one might even suggest that the bridge can be crossed by an act of will. Could Gidon possibly have been caught between the two, struggling within himself to determine whether it was emotionally safe to welcome the hope offered by this stranger as a real possibility? Could the Navi possibly want to highlight for us how short that bridge really is, and how we might require only a subtle shift in tone to choose a more positive perspective?

When presented with a discouraging circumstance, how do we react? When a glimmer of hope is raised, do we snatch it and hold to it or do we deride and dismiss it? When we have questions, do we ask them sarcastically, as if we think we already know the answer (or don't care to) – or do we genuinely ask for answers, because we long to discover truths that might settle our doubts? Can we actively choose between the two?

On the heels of the Yamim Nora'im, a perfect time to focus on improving our relationships, one might also point out that the choice does not lie with the speaker alone. The textual ambiguity in Gidon's dialogue with the angel gives us, as readers, room to determine how we think Gidon meant it, and what we might learn about and from him based on that meaning. The same choices exist in our everyday communications as well. If I receive a cryptic text, do I bristle at the rudeness or assume the friend was simply in a hurry? If I'm not sure whether an email was meant sarcastically, do I assume the best or the worst? Which one **should** I assume? In the story of Gidon, it might be appropriate to read anger and bitterness in his tone; it may well have been entirely appropriate for him to feel that way in his terrible situation. In our own lives, however, as we continually determine the stories of our relationships, we might do better to respond to ambiguity in tone with favorable interpretations and positive responses.

---

Sponsored in honor of Rabbi Berger and all those who contribute words of Torah to Clilei Torah or Clilei HaChodesh.

---

**Rabbi Moshe Berger**

*Scholar in Residence*

(216) 533-5233

moshe@mberger.com

**Leslie Seiger**

*Facilitator*

(216) 392-8966

leslie.seiger@sbcglobal.net

**Sarah Rudolph**

*Editor*

(216) 291-8918

scredolph@gmail.com

**Ronnie Shulman**

*Sponsorships*

(614) 507-3855

rshulman1@gmail.com

**YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREATER CLEVELAND**

Rabbi Naphtali Burnstein, *Rabbi*

Rabbi Aharon Lebovics, *Associate Rabbi (Hebrew Academy)*

Jeffrey Soclof, *President*

**Beachwood Branch**  
2463 S. Green Road  
Beachwood, Ohio 44122  
(216)-382-5740  
office@yigc.org



**Hebrew Academy Branch**  
1860 S. Taylor Road  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
44118