

We are in the middle of the month Elul, that time of year when we prepare for the coming new year by honestly examining our behavior during the past eleven months, asking those we have offended for forgiveness, and resolving to do better next year. Some of us follow rituals, often beginning on Tisha b'Av counting the 49 days to Rosh HaShanah in similar fashion to the days of Omer counting between Pesach and Shavuot. Other rituals include blowing the Shofar during the morning service, reading Psalm 27, and reciting the special *selichot* prayers, which Ashkenazim do for a minimum of four days beginning on the Saturday night before Rosh HaShanah, and Sephardim say during the entire month. The emphasis is on ritual, which is also the focal point of our parashah. But to understand the importance of ritual, we need to define it. Simply stated, a ritual is a prescribed set of actions, which in our religious context is part of a larger system of symbolic actions. Archeologists have discovered that rituals reach back to prehistoric times, so they are obviously an intrinsic part of human culture. Rituals create and mark time; rituals calm and focus us; rituals help reduce anxiety and boost confidence; rituals help us remember our history and pass it on to the next generation; and ultimately, rituals create community. In his book "Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity," [Cambridge University Press, 1999] anthropologist Roy Rappaport declares that ritual is "the social act basic to humanity." [p. 31] And he defines ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers." [p.24] Indeed. We know these words well: "And you shall call out and say before the Lord, your God, 'An Aramean sought to destroy my father / my father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there ...'" (26:5) In Temple times, this ambiguous text was used on Shavuot to give thanks for the first fruits of the season. After the destruction of the second Temple, it was embedded in our Pesach Haggadah. The genius lies in having people repeat these words in the first person – **my** father, not some ancestor's father. We are told to not just recite these words, but to live them. Each one of us is instructed to feel as though we have personally gone through the entire experience from nomadic life in Mesopotamia through prosperity and slavery in Egypt, to miraculous rescue by HaShem. In our TaNaKh and in our liturgy, this powerful narrative is augmented by countless commands to remember: Remember slavery in Egypt, remember (and the paradoxical remember to forget) Amalek, remember the successes and failures of past generations, remember what HaShem did to Miriam, remember HaShem's miracles – remember, remember, remember, and instill these memories in your children so that they continue to live in us and define us as a people. Moses makes it abundantly clear that if the people forget the past, they will lose their vision, which means they will ultimately lose their identity and disappear. Viewing that huge litany of blessings and curses in this light, it is easy to understand the dire warnings they contain. These terrifying predictions, called *tocheicha* (reprimand/rebuke), which also appear in Parashah Bechukotai (Leviticus 26), depict the horrific consequences of abandoning our covenant. It is noteworthy that in Parashah Bechukotai HaShem addresses the people collectively, while in our parashah Moses addresses each person individually. They know as a group what is expected of them, but it is up to each individual to participate in making it happen. Group responsibility depends on personal responsibility, and personal responsibility is activated through knowing and being invested in the common history. It is our tradition to chant both *tocheichot* softly, not as a threat, but as an earnest reminder to never forget where we came from and how we got there. We are not supposed to serve HaShem in fear, but in love and in deep appreciation. It is significant that when discussing our festivals, the Torah commands us to be joyful, and share that joy with others, including "the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, so that they can eat safely in your cities." (26:12) Yes, it is a *mitzvah* to rejoice! And rejoicing is best done in community, which means truly including everyone, regardless of status and ability to contribute. Holy rejoicing is inclusive, because true joy springs from gratitude for all that we are blessed to have and to share with others. Moses reiterates the warning not to become complacent and allow success and prosperity to weaken our connection to our history, because if we forget our origins and lose our past, we will lose our future. "All these curses will befall you ... because you did not serve the Lord, your God, with happiness and with pleasantness of heart when you had abundance." (28:45-47) Unfortunately, we are more inclined to be grateful when we are struggling than once we have achieved security. It happens to individuals, and to societies. In "Duties of the Heart" Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda (1050-1120) teaches that everyone receives gifts, even if they consist only of life and hope, but three things cause us to overlook them: Being too absorbed with worldly pleasures, taking our gifts for granted, being too focused on our problems. During these days of introspection we have countless opportunities to stop, count our blessings, feel our gratitude turn to joy, and then share the joy in our many communal rituals of joy.

Shabbat shalom!