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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Nitzavim



The Quantification of a Person As Revealed By His **YEARNING**

The Jew Attains Clarity When He is Humbled

Nitzavim: “You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d.”

Rashi citing *Chazal*: Why does the *Torah* juxtapose the Portion of the Curses (*Ki Savo*) to the Portion of *Nitzavim*? *Chazal* answer that after the Jewish people heard all of the ninety-eight curses (stated in *Ki Savo*), they were overwhelmed with a feeling of hopelessness, believing that they could not survive. Therefore, in order to reassure the Jewish people, *Moshe* said, “You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d.” Meaning, it is because of all the tragedies that may befall you that you will remain “standing” as Jews before Hashem. The curses are the very cause that keeps the Jews from deviating from the path of *Torah*.

Haazinu: “I have expended all of My arrows in them (*Klal Yisroel*).”

Yalkut (Midrash): Despite all of the tragedies and holocausts that have befallen the Jewish people, they have remained intact – unlike the nations of the world who were destroyed as a result of the tragedies that befell them. The *Midrash* compares the Jewish people to a wooden beam that remains standing even though an archer shoots all of his arrows at it, emptying his quiver. The Jewish people remain intact despite all of the difficulties they have faced throughout history – they remain intact as a Jewish people.

Midrash: There is no other nation in the world that has been able to withstand Hashem’s punishments and not be destroyed through that punishment. The Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and the Romans, have long been destroyed as a result of Hashem’s punishment, and the Jewish people remain intact. The question is why have we survived and they all perished?

The answer is – when Hashem’s wrath came upon the nations of the world, rather than recognizing that

their punishment was a result of their failings and that they must make corrections, they chose to defy and rebel against Him. Therefore they were destroyed. Conversely, when the Jews are faced with tragedy and suffering, they become introspective and recognize that the failing is theirs and subsequently they return to *Hashem*. Therefore it is the curses that keep the Jewish people in check so that they should not deviate from the path of *Torah*.

There is a principle that states that all Jews are responsible for one another. *Hashem* sees the Jewish people as one entity, and therefore the good deeds of the *tzaddik* spiritualize the entire Jewish people. On the other hand, the failings of even the few will detract from the spirituality of the entire Jewish people. For the same reason why Jews suffer as a result of communal responsibility, they are also beneficiaries of blessings of others because we are one community.

A *minyan* (quorum of ten men) is a microcosm of the entire *Klal Yisroel* and thus, when one prays within the context of a *minyan*, he draws upon the merits of the *Klal Yisroel* as a whole. We read in *Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers)*, "If one contributes to the needs of the community, one's intent should be for the sake of *Hashem* because in that context one not only draws on his own merit to succeed but also draws on the merit of the entire community." When one finally succeeds in his communal pursuit he will not only be rewarded based on his own merit but he will also be rewarded for the success that came through the merit of the community. A Jew is not an isolated entity. He is part of the *Klal Yisroel*. A Jew who separates himself from the Jewish community "does not have a share in the world to come" because he chose not to have a relationship with *Hashem* (which is only possible through the Jewish people). This concept is relevant to *Rosh Hashanah*.

The *Tur* (the first code of laws composed by *Rabbeinu Yaakov* son of *Rabbeinu Asher*) in his introduction to *Rosh Hashanah*: A Jew must approach the Day of Judgment in a groomed state. He must cut and comb his hair and wear clean clothing. One would think that when approaching the Day of Judgment, during which even the angels in heaven tremble in fear, one would be exclusively concerned about the outcome of the day and not about his appearance.

Rosh Hashanah is the day that *Hashem* decides the future of all existence and every individual for good

or bad. Despite the gravity of the day, a Jew must approach *Rosh Hashanah* with confidence and joy that *Hashem* will render a positive judgment on his behalf. The fact is that on *Rosh Hashanah* one's life hangs in the balance. He is suspended between life and death. If so, then how is it possible to have such confidence that the outcome will be good?

The answer is that the curses and tragedies throughout history have kept the Jews in stead and the Jew has an innate sense to perceive truth when he is faced with difficulty. Therefore the Jew, who has the ability to perceive the gravity of the Day of Judgment, will be enabled to revere and glorify *Hashem* and do the right thing. Thus he can approach the Day of Judgment with confidence because of his understanding of the awesomeness of *Rosh Hashanah*. The Jews are the only people who have been and are able to perceive truth in existence despite and because of their extreme difficulties. The *Torah* juxtaposes the Portion of the curses to the Portion of *Nitzavim* in order to teach us that it is because of the curses that we "are able to stand today before *Hashem*."

The Process of Teshuvah

Torah: At the end of time the world will witness numerous tragedies and holocausts. The nations of the world will ask, "What have the Jewish people done to deserve such punishment?" To this they will answer, "They are deserving of this punishment because they have abandoned the covenant with their G-d, which they had entered into when they left Egypt." If the nations of the world will be able to clearly understand that the cause of destruction and holocaust comes only because of transgressing the Will of *Hashem*, then why is it that they do not repent? The answer is that the nations of the world believe that the Jewish people deserve this punishment for violating their covenant with their G-d – and this has no relevance to them.

Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin*: Towards the end of time (before the coming of *Moshiach*), the Jewish people will do *teshuvah* (repent) in one of two ways: either out of love for *Hashem* or out of fear. One opinion in the *Gemara* states that even if *Hashem* must institute a king over the Jews whose decrees are as harsh as *Haman Ha'Rasha (Haman the Evil One)*, He will do this in order to force them to do *teshuvah*.

Torah: “It will be that when all of these things come upon you – the blessings and the curses that I have presented before you – then you will take it to heart among all the nations where *Hashem*, your G-d has dispersed you; and you will return unto *Hashem*, your G-d, and listen to His voice...with all your heart and all your soul.”

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh: The first response to difficulties will be that the Jews will (as the verse states) “take it to heart.” Meaning they will understand that suffering is a result of their transgressing the Will of *Hashem*. The question is what does one do after coming to this realization? The verse states that one must do *teshuvah*. If one understands the cause of his problems, he must do *teshuvah* or else the realization has no value.

For example, if a cardiologist informs his patient that his failing health is due to his irresponsible lifestyle and the patient does nothing to correct his behavior, then he will die. Therefore unless one takes the initiative to do *teshuvah* after understanding his shortcomings, there is no spiritual rehabilitation. *Teshuvah* is by no means a simple process. One must go against the current of society as well as his own inclinations and habits.

Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin*: “In the location where *baalei teshuvah* (repentant people) stand, even absolute *tzaddikim* (righteous people) do not stand.” *Hashem* values the *teshuvah* of the Jew who has come back to Judaism, despite his sinful past, more than the *tzaddik* – who has always been devout. How do we understand this?

Gemara in Tractate *Menachos*: The physical world was created with the spirituality of the letter “*hey*” (a letter of the Hebrew alphabet). The letter “*hey*” is comprised of a horizontal line which rests on a vertical line on the right and has a vertical line on the left which does not quite reach the horizontal line (or roof). There is a small opening on the left side of the letter between the left leg and the roof of the letter.

Gemara: The shape of the letter signifies the reality of physical existence. The wide-open space between the right and left leg represents free choice. The world is wide open to choose as one desires. If a person makes wrong choices and falls to a spiritual abyss and wants to return through *teshuvah* – the shape of the letter indicates how this is done. He cannot return to spirituality on the same path from which he exited. He

must enter or return through the small opening on the left side of the “*hey*.” This means that he chooses to now live his life with greater constraints.

Rabbeinu Yona in his work *Shaarei Teshuvah* (The Gates of Repentance) and in his commentary on *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of Our Fathers): All of the *mitzvos* of the *Torah* are “*parparaos* (appetizers)” to *yiras shamayim* (Fear of Heaven – *Hashem*). Just as the appetizer is not intended to satiate the person but rather to stimulate his appetite, so too is the value of all the *mitzvos* of the *Torah* vis-à-vis *yiras shamayim*. The intrinsic value of performing a *mitzvah* is not for its own sake alone, but also as a demonstration and an expression of one’s *yiras shamayim* (fear of heaven).

When one observes the *Shabbos*, *tefillin*, dietary laws, etc., one is demonstrating his *yiras shamayim* because the only reason why he is adhering to any of the *mitzvos* is because of his fear and reverence of *Hashem*. The performance of *mitzvos* is therefore a proclamation of one’s fear of the Honored and Awesome Name of *Hashem*.

Midrash on *Shir Ha’Shirim* (Song of Songs): One of the opening verses can be interpreted to mean, “The words of the *Sofrim* (the *Rabbis*) are more beloved (to *Hashem*) than the wine of *Torah*.” This indicates that *Hashem* values *rabbinic* enactments to a greater degree than the Divine Word – the *Torah* itself.

Rabbeinu Yonah: The reason for this is because through the adherence to the *Rabbinic* fence one is demonstrating a greater degree of *yiras shamayim* (fear of *Hashem*). The basis for a *Rabbinic* fence is human frailty. Because of a person’s vulnerability and lack of continuous cognizance, there is a concern that he may violate the *Torah* law. Therefore, the *Chachamim* (*Rabbis*) legislated the various fences to address all conditions so that the *Torah* law should not be violated. Since the essence of all *mitzvos* is one’s demonstration of *yiras shamayim*, how much more so is one’s adherence to *Rabbinic* enactments a demonstration of *yiras shamayim*!

With this explanation we can understand the *Gemara*: “In the location where *baalei teshuvah* (repentant people) stand, even absolute *tzaddikim* (righteous people) do not stand.” *Baalei Teshuvah* embrace a dimension of *yiras shamayim* that goes beyond *Rabbinic* and conventional fences. Because of their

addiction to physicality, when they return they must restrict themselves more than the *tzaddikim* by establishing additional fences; as a result they are more deprived. Since, as we said, *Hashem* values *Rabbinic* fences even more than His own Dictates because they are an advanced expression of *yiras shamayim*, then He must appreciate the personal fences of the *baalei teshuvah* even more. This is why *Hashem* esteems the *baal teshuvah* to a greater degree than the *tzaddik*, who does not need these extra restrictions to remain devout.

How does One Achieve His Spiritual Potential

Torah: In the *Shmita* year (the Seventh year) the land must remain fallow and one is not permitted to engage in agricultural pursuits because it is, “*Shabbos L’Hashem* (A Sabbath for *Hashem*)”.

Sforno in his commentary: “*Shabbos L’Hashem*” means that the *Shmita* year should be a time of dedicating oneself to introspection, meditation, and the study of *Torah*. The *Shmita* year is devoted completely to spiritual endeavors. It says that during the first day of *Chol HaMoed Succos* of the eighth year (the year after the first *Shmita* cycle), the entire *Klal Yisroel* (men, women, and children) must gather at the Temple Mount to hear the reading of *Mishna Torah* (The Book of *Devarim*) by the King of Israel. This Positive Commandment is referred to as *Hakhel*.

Torah: The purpose of this reading is,” So that they (the Jewish people) should listen and learn to fear *Hashem*.” The purpose of the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* is to instill the fear of *Hashem* into the hearts of the Jewish people. The *Torah* designates the eighth year during the Festival of *Succos* (after the first *Shmita* Cycle) as the time for the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*. In order for us to understand the sequence of events, which begins with the Sabbatical year and culminates with the reading of the *Torah* by the King on the Festival of *Succos* (at the beginning of the eighth year), we must understand why this progression is the most appropriate.

It would seem that according to the interpretation of “*Shabbos L’Hashem*” (offered by the *Sforno*) that the Sabbatical year which is designated for introspection, meditation and the study of *Torah* – should follow the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* rather than precede it. Since the purpose of the reading of *Mishna Torah* on the Temple Mount is to learn to fear *Hashem*, shouldn’t

one first be inspired by this reading and then dedicate the following year to spiritual pursuits? Yet, the *Torah* states that this is not the case. The question is why?

We have the capacity to experience and internalize an event only after a certain degree of spiritual preparation. To begin this process we must dedicate a year to spirituality (the study of *Torah*, meditation, and introspection), without any distraction whatsoever. Then we must experience *Rosh Hashanah* (the Day of Judgment), and the Ten Days of Penitence, culminating with *Yom Kippur*. It is only at point, when we have been sufficiently readied that we are able to ascend the Temple Mount to listen to the King of Israel read the Book of *Devarim* and learn to fear *Hashem*. The *Torah* is teaching us that even with an awe inspiring event, we do not have the capacity and sensitivity to receive, absorb and internalize it unless we first prepare ourselves.

Torah: Adam was made from earth (*Adam* – from “*adama*” meaning “earth”). Just like a field needs to be cultivated and prepared for sowing, regardless of the quality of its soil and seed, so that the seed takes root and germinates properly, so too does man, regardless of his potential, need to be cultivated in order to be receptive to spirituality.

Talmud: “I (*Hashem*) created the *Yetzer HaRa* (The Evil Inclination) and I created the *Torah* as its antidote.” For the Jew, the study of the *Torah* is equivalent to the “plow” which cultivates and orients the person to be sensitive to its values and to appreciate its concepts. Therefore before being qualified to do the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*, one experienced the following sequence of events: the *Shmita* year, *Rosh Hashanah* and the Ten Days of Penitence culminating with *Yom Kippur*. If one enters into *Rosh Hashanah* (the Day of Judgment) – the most awesome and solemn day of the year- without any degree of preparation how can one have a sense of *Hashem* and the gravity of the day?

Chazal: The *Torah* was given to those “who partook of the *Mann* (Manna).” The *Mann* (which sustained the Jewish people in the desert for a forty year period) was spiritual food that presented itself in a physical form. It spiritualized and gave the Jewish people the capacity to fully absorb the Sinai experience and the *Torah* itself. Had the Jews eaten physical food (which is material and earthy), then they would not have had a sufficient capacity to internalize the *Torah* properly.

Shir Ha'Shirim (Song of Songs): "I am asleep but my heart is awake."

Reb Chaim of Volozhin *z'tl*: This verse based on the *Zohar* that "I am asleep" is referring to the *Klal Yisroel*. The Jewish people are asleep and are not sensitive to their spirituality and to *Hashem*. He explains that the phrase "my heart is awake" is referring to *Hashem*, who is the heart of *Klal Yisroel*. *Hashem* is continuously awake and He sees that His children (*Klal Yisroel*) are in a deep sleep. How does *Hashem* awaken them?

Reb Chaim of Volozhin explains this with a parable: There was a king whose son was stricken with an illness that would intensify if he were to fall asleep. In an effort to keep his son awake, the king removed him from the bed and placed him on the hardened ground. However, despite the discomfort of the earthen floor, the son began dosing off. The king had to resort to placing knives and spikes under his son to force him to stay awake.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin *z'tl*: This is the reason why the Jewish people experience tragedies and suffering. It is *Hashem's* attempt to keep us awake. When the Jewish people drift away from *Hashem* and fall into a trance-like state which causes them to be insensitive to their spirituality, it will ultimately bring about spiritual death. Therefore *Hashem* brings upon us pain and suffering to awaken us so that we should not drift into spiritual oblivion. We experience many difficulties but are we in touch enough with ourselves to realize why we are experiencing them? Although *Hashem* attempts to awaken us from our trance with much suffering, we are not sensitive to understand and appreciate the value of this experience.

Rambam in *Hilchos Teshuvah* (*The Laws of Repentance*): Listening to the sound of the *Shofar* is a *Torah* Decree and simultaneously it transmits a subtle message: "Those who sleep, awaken from your sleep. Rouse yourself from your trance, introspect your ways, remember your Creator and do *teshuvah*." A man can appreciate and relate to a spiritual experience properly only if he sensitizes and elevates himself above his physicality. Therefore in order to maximize on the *Rosh Hashanah* experience, one must orient himself to spirituality through the increased study of *Torah* and through doing *mitzvos* in a more perfect manner.

How Far Away are We from that Special Level?

Torah: At the end of time the Jewish people will do *teshuvah* and return to *Hashem* – "...when you return to *Hashem*, your G-d with all your heart and all your soul." The *Torah* continues, "For this commandment that I command you today – it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, [for you] to say, "Who can ascend to the heavens for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?"... Rather, the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and your heart – to perform it."

There is a question as to which *mitzvah* (that is close to our mouth and heart) the verse is referring. According to *Rashi*, it is referring to the study of *Torah*, while other Commentators, such as *Sforno*, explain that the one that is "close to our mouth and heart" is the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*. According to *Sforno*, the *Torah* first states that one will introspect and do *teshuvah* – "...when you return to *Hashem*..." Then the *Torah* qualifies this by saying that *teshuvah* is not a difficult or an obscure process. As it states, "For this commandment that I command you today – it is not hidden from you and it is not distant." Meaning in order to do *teshuvah* one need not ascend to heaven or consult with a prophet or seek the counsel of a special teacher from across the sea; but rather, *teshuvah* is "very near to you – in your mouth and your heart – to perform it."

According to the *Rambam* in *Hilchos Teshuvah* (*Laws of Teshuvah*) it would seem that the verse is referring to *teshuvah* since "in your mouth" refers to the *vidui* (confession) aspect of *teshuvah* which must be verbalized. *Rashi* however explains that this verse, "For this commandment that I command you today – it is not hidden from you and it is not distant" is referring to the *mitzvah* of the study of *Torah* and not the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*. However the portion preceding this verse is discussing *teshuvah* – "when you return to *Hashem*". The question is according to *Rashi's* explanation – what is the relevance of *Torah* study to the *teshuvah* process? Why does the *Torah* juxtapose the *mitzvah* of the study of *Torah* to the process of *teshuvah*?

Midrash in the introduction to *Eicha* (*Lamentations*): Although the First *Bais HaMikdash* (*The Temple*) was destroyed because the Jews violated the three cardinal sins (Murder, Idolatry, and Adultery), if they

would have studied the *Torah* diligently, it would not have been destroyed. *Hashem* said, “Hopefully the Jewish people would have abandoned Me (even to become idolaters) and kept My *Torah* (study of *Torah*) because the illumination inherent in *Torah* would have brought them back to good (the good path to do *teshuvah*).” Therefore the *Torah* juxtaposes the *mitzvos* of *teshuvah* and the study *Torah* in order to teach us that regardless of how far a Jew has drifted from the proper path, if one studies *Torah*, the enlightenment from that study would give him clarity to be able to recognize his failings and cause him to do a proper *teshuvah*.

Gemara in Tractate *Avodah Zara* tells us that if a person is a true heretic and later becomes a *baal teshuvah*, *Hashem* will cause that person to die soon after he had done *teshuvah* because heresy is so deeply rooted in a person that even if he has a moment of clarity he will ultimately revert back to his heretical views.

The *Gemara* tells us that the same is true regarding a person who has a sexual addiction and does *teshuvah*. *Hashem* will cause that person also to die soon after the *teshuvah* because He does not want him to revert

back to his sinful ways. Seemingly even if a person understands his shortcomings and does a proper *teshuvah*, there is a great risk that the person will minimally slacken in his commitment and may even revert back to his original way of life. The question is – what can be done to maintain a level of appreciation for the wrong and cause the person to remain steadfast in his *teshuvah*?

Based on the *Torah* juxtaposing the process of *teshuvah* to the *mitzvah* of the study of *Torah*, it is teaching us that the only way for a person can remain committed to *teshuvah* is through the ongoing study of *Torah*. It is only through the study of *Torah* that one can have a continuous sense of right and wrong. The *Torah* tells us that this is not a difficult or remote possibility for any Jew. It is “very near to you – in your mouth and your heart – to perform it.” Every Jew has the opportunity of *Torah* available to him on a continuous basis, regardless of where he may find himself. This will guarantee the sense that is needed to keep a person committed to the proper path.



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