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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Nitzavim



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

The Jewish People, G-d's True Subjects

Midrash: Reb Chanina bar Papa says, 'G-d said, 'There was never a nation that I have smitten that I needed to smite them again. However, you the children of Yaakov, regardless of how much you have been punished, you have never been annihilated. As it states, 'My arrows have been expended, but they are not expended (the Jewish people).'

This is analogous to an archer who shoots his arrows into a beam. Regardless of how many arrows he shoots into the beam, the arrows are expended but the beam remains intact. Similarly, when suffering comes upon the Jewish people, the suffering will eventually come to an end, but the Jewish people will remain secure. They are not consumed due to the suffering. 'G-d overturns the wicked, but the house of the righteous remains.' (Proverbs)

Why is the portion of *Nitzavim* juxtaposed to the portion of the curses? It is because after the Jewish people had

heard the nine-eight curses in *Ki Savo* and the forty-nine curses in *Toras Kohanim (Bechukosai)* they exclaimed, 'Who is able to withstand all of these curses?'

Moshe immediately summoned them and started to appease the Jewish people. Why when G-d punishes the nations of the world, they are annihilated? It is because when they are punished they bolt from G-d and become defiant of Him and they do not mention the Name of G-d as it states, 'You should pour out Your Wrath upon the nations because they do not know You. They do call out in Your Name.'

However, when suffering comes upon the Jewish people, they become subdued and humbled and pray to G-d as it states, 'When suffering comes upon us, we call out in the Name of G-d.'

Therefore, when suffering comes upon the Jewish people it has a positive affect because it causes them to introspect and repent, unlike the nations of the world who bolt and become defiant of G-d. What

is the differentiating characteristic that causes the reaction of the nations of the world and the response of the Jewish people?

King David writes in Psalms, "Fortunate is the nation who knows how to blow the sound of the *shofar*..."

Midrash: Do the nations of the world not know how to play musical instruments? They are proficient in many musical instruments and have many expert musicians amongst them. Why are they not as capable as the Jewish people regarding the blowing of the *shofar*?

Fortunate is the nation who knows how to 'seduce' their Maker with the sound of the *shofar*. The Jewish people know how to seduce with the blowing of the *shofar*, unrelated to their musical ability.

What is the element of the blowing of the *shofar* that seduces G-d?

Gemara: G-d said to the Jewish people, "When you blow the *shofar*, you should cite verses of kingship so that you should accept upon yourselves My Kingship."

The blowing of the *shofar* is the equivalent of coronating a king. When the *shofar* is blown on *Rosh Hashanah* by the Jewish people, they are coronating G-d as their King. Therefore, it is essential that the blast of the *shofar* is accompanied with verses of kingship.

The nature of the relationship between a subject and a king is total submission and negation of the subject to his master. The "seduction" of the Jewish people to G-d is that when they blow the *shofar* and recite the verses of kingship, they are doing so with total submission and accepting Him as their King. They are willing to negate themselves totally to G-d.

Although the nations of the world may be expertly proficient in the blowing of the *shofar*, the element of "seduction" is lacking because they cannot fully submit and accept G-d as their Master. This was clearly demonstrated at the time of the giving of the *Torah* at *Sinai*.

Chazal: Before G-d offered the *Torah* to the Jewish people, He offered it to all the nations of the world. Each nation asked G-d, "What is written in it?" After G-d revealed to them a commandment, each nation rejected the *Torah* for its own reason because it was not in accordance to its particular way of life.

When the Edomites were presented with the *Torah*,

they asked. "What is written in it?" G-d responded, "It is written in the *Torah* 'Thou shall not kill.' They rejected the *Torah* because they said, "We cannot accept the *Torah* because we received a blessing from our forefather 'by the sword you shall live.'" They were not able to fully submit to G-d to do His Will.

In contrast, the Jewish people accepted the *Torah* with the declaration, "*Naaseh v'Nishma* (we will do and we will listen)." They accepted the *Torah* unequivocally without understanding the extent of their obligation because they were willing to submit to G-d's Will as His subjects.

One is only qualified to make this declaration if one has the capacity to fully negate himself and submit to G-d to be His subject. Their declaration was a demonstration of the essence of the Jewish people.

Therefore, when the Jew blows the *shofar* it can be complemented with his own negation to G-d, causing the blowing of the *shofar* to be a seduction. It is because of this innate characteristic that when G-d brings suffering upon the Jewish people they are humbled and recognize that it is only due to their own failings that they are being punished. They therefore continue to exist.

In contrast, the nations of the world bolt and defy G-d when they are punished because they cannot submit to His Will. They feel that G-d is infringing upon their existence.

Therefore, when the nations of the world blow the *shofar*, although the sound may be identical to the blowing of the Jewish people, because it is lacking in the aspect of submission, their blowing has no value.

The Subliminal Effect of Society

"For you know we dwelled in the land of Egypt and how we passed through the midst of the nations through whom you passed."

Moshe is addressing two segments of the Jewish people; the generation that left Egypt who were less than twenty years old at the time of the decree and the generation who was born in the desert and was never exposed to the idolatry of Egypt.

The beginning of the verse, "For you know we dwelled in the land of Egypt" is referring to those born in

Egypt and the second part of the verse “we passed the midst of the nations through whom you passed” is referring to those who were born in the desert and were exposed only to the idolatry of the other nations.

“And you saw their abominations and their detestable idols- of wood and stone, of silver and gold...”

Rashi: Moshe said to the Jewish people, “You saw the idolatry that is as detestable as putrid rodents. It was as abominable and disgusting as dung. Perhaps your heart may draw you to follow their ways. It is because of this exposure that I am binding you with an oath and a curse so that you should not transgress.”

If the idolatry to which the Jewish people were exposed to in Egypt and the idolatry of their journey were as despicable and putrid as rodents and dung, why should there be a concern that they would have been affected by their exposure to it and influenced to be drawn towards idolatry?

We see from the *Torah*, that despite the fact that idolatry is despicable, it is still possible to be negatively affected by its exposure.

“It happened (*vayehi*) when *Pharaoh* sent out the people...” (*Beshalach*)

Midrash: The term “*vayehi*” can be understood as an expression of “woe.” G-d said, ‘Woe to Me that I needed to send out the (Jewish) people when I did! Had they been able to remain longer in Egypt, I would have been able to bring more plagues upon the Egyptians.’

To what is this analogous? It is similar to one who tortured the prince and was subsequently captured by the king. The king gave the order to have the culprit whipped because of what he had done to the prince. However soon after the whipping began, he died. When the king heard of what had happened he said, “Woe to me that he died. Had he lived longer, I would have been able to beat him more.”

Similarly, although G-d had brought ten plagues upon Egypt, it would have been preferable to bring more upon them.

Bais HaLevy: If G-d has Mercy on all of His Creations, why would He want to inflict more suffering upon the Egyptians if they were undeserving of that pain? Therefore how could G-d be pained that He could not bring more punishment upon them?

Although the ten plagues were brought upon Egypt to punish them for enslaving and afflicting the Jewish people during their bondage, they served a dual purpose. While the Jewish people were in Egypt, they became idolaters due to the influence of their masters and culture, which was pagan. Each of the plagues that came upon Egypt was a revealed miracle that caused the Jewish people to advance spiritually. By witnessing the obvious Hand of G-d in Egypt, it caused the idolatrous beliefs of the Jewish people to become weakened.

With every plague that the Jewish people witnessed, they understood to a greater degree that their pagan position had no basis. Witnessing the plagues was a purging process of the Jewish people. If G-d would have brought more plagues upon Egypt, the Jewish people would have been fully purged of the idolatrous influences.

Because the Jewish people left Egypt when they had, there remained a trace of idolatry. Therefore, they were susceptible to the sin of the golden calf. It is because of the sin of the golden calf that the Jewish people reverted back to the spiritual status of *Adam* after the sin of the Tree of Knowledge. As a result, the world was not brought to a level of perfection.

Had the Jewish people witnessed more plagues in Egypt before leaving, they would not have succumbed to the idolatry of the golden calf and they would have achieved the objective of Creation, which is its perfection.

Moshe told the Jewish people that because they were initially exposed to the idolatry of Egypt, (although they had mostly purged of its affect when they accepted the *Torah* at *Sinai*), they needed to understand that because of their initial exposure to idolatry in Egypt and the recent exposure to the idolatry on their journey, they were susceptible to embrace pagan beliefs, despite the fact that it is as detestable as putrid rodents and dung.

Rambam: If one lives in a community that is detrimental to his spirituality, he has an obligation to flee the community even if he must flee into a desert or cave. Regardless of the physical and social discomfort that one may need to experience, one must extricate himself at all costs from an environment that could negatively affect his spirituality.

If one remains in an environment that has negative influences, one may not realize its effects upon him. The subliminal influences of the community will gradually change his beliefs and his life.

The Month of Elul, a Semblance of the World to Come

“(Moshe said to the Jewish people), *Hashem*, your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love *Hashem*, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”

There is a “covering (foreskin) on the heart (*orlas haleiv*)” that must be removed, just as there is a covering on the male organ that must be removed in order to allow the individual to have relevance to spirituality.

Ramban: ‘One who comes to purify himself, he will be assisted (by G-d).’ (*Gemara Shabbos*) One who sincerely wants to make spiritual corrections in his life and advance, G-d promises that He will assist him.

It seems from these verses that from the beginning of Creation man was given the power of free will, to choose to do as he wishes.

Gemara: ‘Everything is predestined by heaven, except for the fear of heaven. One may choose to be devoutly righteous or to the contrary, he may choose to be evil.’

Why did G-d endow man with free choice? It is so that he may be meritorious. If he were to choose to do good, he will be deserving of reward, and if he chooses to do evil, he will be deserving of punishment.

However, at the time of *Moshiach*, there will no longer be free choice. Man will naturally do good. The heart of man will not lust after anything that is inappropriate and should not be desired. Lust and desire are the covering of the heart. When lust and desire are removed, it is considered that the heart has been circumcised.

At that time, mankind will revert to the spiritual status of *Adam* before he sinned. *Adam* was naturally inclined to do the Will of G-d, which was good.

The sixth month of the year is called “*Elul*: which is an acronym for, “*Ani l’dodi v’dodi li* - I am to my beloved (G-d) and my beloved is to me.”

Within the verse, “G-d will circumcise your heart (*es levavecha*) and the heart of (*v’es levav*) your offspring,”

there is an allusion to the month of *Elul*, which is a time of G-d’s Mercy.

The words “...your heart (*es levavecha*) and the heart of (*v’es levav*) your offspring...” the first letters of the words “*es levavcha* and *v’es levav* (your hearts and the heart) spell the word *Elul* - “*aleph vav aleph lamed*.” It is an allusion to the fact that *Elul* is a month of introspection and repentance.

Based on *Ramban*’s interpretation of the verse, that it is referring to the end of time when G-d will remove the lust and desire from the heart of man, it is an indication that the month of *Elul* presently has a semblance of the end of time. During the month of *Elul* the Jew will merit a special degree of Divine Assistance to enable him to return to G-d. However, in order to merit this Divine Assistance, one must take the initiative to purify himself, as the acronym alludes, “I am to my beloved” and “My beloved is to me.”

A Jew’s Perspective of Life

King David writes in Psalms, “One thing I asked of *Hashem*, that shall I seek: That I dwell in the House of *Hashem* all the days of my life; to behold the sweetness of *Hashem* and to contemplate His Sanctuary...”

As a young man, King David was a humble shepherd who tended to the flocks of his father. He later killed Goliath the giant, which was miraculous. As a result of this achievement, he was taken to be the son in law of *Shaul*, the king of Israel. Eventually, he himself became the King of Israel. As the king, David conquered the Land and drove out the nations that occupied it.

Chofetz Chaim: King David is saying that his perspective of life never wavered or changed. As a humble shepherd with no renown, King David’s aspiration was to dwell in the House of G-d. One would think that after killing Goliath the giant and consequently assuming a great degree of renown, King David’s perspective of aspiration would have changed. Nevertheless he states in that context, “My only desire is to dwell in the House of G-d.”

Even after becoming the son in law of the king, he did not change his perspective of life. One would think that after ascending to be the king of Israel, because of the power that he attained, it would cause his perspective to wane and change due to the great

distractions of that position. However, King David states that this was not so.

Rambam: “Every Jew is required to study *Torah* whether he is poor or rich, whether healthy or suffering pain, whether a young man or one who has grown weak; even if he is a poor man who makes his living collecting charity by going from door to door, even if he is a husband and has young children, he must set for himself times for learning *Torah* during the day and night as it says: “And you shall study it day and night.”

One’s obligation to study *Torah* is not dependent on one’s personal predicament or situation, but rather, it is the primary purpose of the Jew’s existence. Without the study of *Torah*, one cannot have a relationship with G-d. Regardless of King David’s station in life, he did not waiver in his desire and pursuit to fulfill the Will of G-d and to cleave to Him.

Life is full of distractions and influences. Even if one returns to G-d and chooses to become a fully observant Jew, there will come a time when his fervor and dedication will plateau. What initially seemed to be inspiring can eventually become ordinary and mundane.

One must continuously introspect and assess his spiritual perspective. He must ask himself, “am I still on the positive path that I initially set upon? Or am I stagnating?”

King David killed a giant and became the king of Israel and did not change his spiritual perspective and posture. This is because he was one of the three most humble people to ever live. King David’s expression of humility was, “I am a worm and not a man.”

Regardless of his level of accomplishment and power, King David always felt that “G-d was always before him.” Because of his exceptional humility, he was never affected by his station in life. King David continuously understood and internalized the fact that every aspect of his being is due to G-d willing it to be so.



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