



Parshas Nitzavim - Vayelech

For the week ending 23 Elul 5756
6 & 7 September 1996

Overview

Insights

NITZAVIM

On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers together all the people, both young and old, lowly and exalted, men and women in a final initiation. The covenant includes not only those who are present, but even those generations yet unborn. Moshe admonishes the people again to be extremely vigilant against idol worship, because in spite of having witnessed the abominations of Egypt, there will always be the temptation to experiment with foreign philosophies as a pretext for immorality. Moshe describes the desolation of the Land of Israel which will be a result of the failure to heed Hashem's *mitzvos*. Both their descendants and foreigners alike will remark on the singular desolation of the Land and its apparent inability to be sown or to produce crops. The conclusion will be apparent to all — the Jewish People have forsaken the One who protects them, in favor of idols which can do nothing. Moshe promises, however, that the people will eventually repent after both the blessings and the curses have been fulfilled. However assimilated they will have become among the nations, eventually Hashem will bring them back to Eretz Yisrael. Moshe tells the people to remember that the Torah is not a remote impossibility; rather its fulfillment is within the grasp of every Jew. The Parsha concludes with a dramatic choice between life and death. Moshe exhorts the people to choose life.

VAYELECH

On this, the last day of his life, Moshe goes from tent to tent throughout the camp, bidding farewell to his beloved people, encouraging them to "keep the faith." Moshe tells them that whether he is among them or not, Hashem is with them, and will vanquish their enemies. Then he summons Yehoshua, and in front of all the people, exhorts him to be strong and courageous as the leader of the Jewish People. In this manner, he strengthens Yehoshua's status as the new leader. Moshe teaches them the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*: That every seven years on the first day of the intermediate days of Succos, the entire nation, including small children, is to gather together at the Temple to hear the King read from the Book of *Devarim*. The sections that he reads deal with faithfulness to Hashem, the covenant, and reward and punishment. Hashem tells Moshe that his end is near, and he should therefore summon Yehoshua to stand with him in the *Mishkan*, where Hashem will teach Yehoshua. Hashem then tells Moshe and Yehoshua that after entering the Land, the people will be unfaithful to Him, and begin to worship other gods. Hashem will then completely "hide his face," so that it will seem that the Jewish People are at the mercy of fate, and that they will be hunted by all. Hashem instructs Moshe and Yehoshua to write down a song - *Ha'azinu* - which will serve as a "witness" against the Jewish People when they sin. Moshe records the song in writing and teaches it to Bnei Yisrael. Moshe completes his transcription of the Torah, and instructs the *Levi'im* to place it to the side of the *Aron* (Holy Ark), so that no one will ever write a new Torah Scroll that is different from the original - for there will always be a reference copy.

DREAMING OF THE LIGHT

"And you will return to Hashem, your G-d" (30:2)
Pitch Black. Total Darkness. Suddenly a ray of light from a candle pierces the gloom, and the darkness dissolves. It's as though the darkness was never there. It's vanished, vanquished. Nothing rules now but light, and darkness recedes into the memory like a dimly remembered bad dream.

This is the way of Teshuva.

When we come back to Hashem, we become like new creations, and all our past life is no more than a dim memory of a bad dream in the radiance of our return...

(Based on the Baal Shem Tov in Degel Machane Ephraim seen in Iturei Torah)

GETTING TO THE UPPER THIRD

"Gather together the nation, the men and the women and the children...in order that they will hear and they should learn..." (31:12)

Every seven years, the king reads the Torah in the presence of the entire nation. This is the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*. Even though the young children did not understand what was being read to them, their parents received reward for bringing them.

This reveals to us a major principle in the education of the young. Even though they may make a noise and be distracting to their elders, the experience for them is irreplaceable; for they feel, through osmosis, the importance to the Torah. Even though they cannot understand a word, they have imbibed a vital lesson: That the Torah is the life blood of the Jewish People.

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky *zt"l* was once visiting a kindergarten of a Torah school. Noticing that all the *mezuzos* on the doors were placed in the lower third of the doorposts, he remarked "It's a lovely idea to put the *mezuzah* in a place where the children can easily reach up and touch them, but please put them where they belong, on the upper third of the doorpost, and let the children use a stool to reach the *mezuzah*. Otherwise they will grow up thinking that you can put the *mezuzah* anywhere you wish. One does not raise children with untruths."

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This story can serve as a parable for our whole relationship to the Torah. *We must go up to the Torah, not bring the Torah down to our level.* Wherever the attempt has been made to make Judaism 'easier', the outcome is that people have come to despise it and reject it altogether.

We may be no more than spiritual children, but we will never grow into adults unless we look up to that *mezuzah*. And then, maybe, one day, we will be able to reach it by ourselves, unaided by a stool. But if we learn that we have to make no effort to raise ourselves up to the Torah, we will make the mistake of thinking that we are already shoulder-high to the Torah — that we need to make no efforts to change and improve ourselves. We will thus both debase the Torah and give ourselves no motivation to grow. We will merely sit back like self-congratulatory pygmies, convinced that we are already spiritual giants.

(Based on a story reported by Rabbi Nissan Wolpin in the Jewish Observer seen in Growth through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin)

ON HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE

***"For the thing is very close to you; in your mouth and in your heart to do it."* (30:15)**

Feeling. Speech. Action.

This is the order of things. First comes feeling — *the heart* — which is then crystallized into speech — *the mouth*. Then speech becomes further concretized, garbing itself in the clothes of physical action — *doing*. This is the normal sequence of events.

Why does the Torah here alter this natural order? Why does the 'mouth' — speech — precede the 'heart' — feeling, and only then comes 'to do it' — action?

There are times when we cannot rely on our natural feelings to bring us to serve Hashem in the proper way. Times when the heart does not necessarily speak eloquently, when feelings are numbed and we are distant from ourselves and our Creator. Times when we may be confused and we lack the will to transform a fledgling feeling into speech, let alone speech into deed.

It is at those times we need to use our mouths to open our hearts. To cry out to He who always listens. To He who opens all hearts. Only then will we be able to transform the meditation of the heart into the active service of The Master of the World.

(Based on an idea heard from Rabbi Mordechai Perlmán)

Haftorah: Yishaya 61:10-63:9

ONLY HAPPINESS IS A TWO-WAY STREET

***"I will rejoice intensely with Hashem, my soul shall exult with my G-d."* (61:10)**

Our Sages teach that "a person is obligated to make a blessing on adversity just as he makes a blessing on good." (*Berachos* 54) However, this is only when the misfortune happens *to oneself*. But if one's neighbor is beset by tragic events, it is forbidden to rejoice. In fact, a person is obligated to empathize with the pain of his neighbor.

This is the intention of this verse: *"I will rejoice intensely with Hashem..."* When I perceive Hashem

through the aspect of His Mercy, when He blesses me with an abundance of revealed good, then I can both rejoice and give others cause to rejoice.

However, when I perceive G-d through the aspect of His Judgment — *"my soul shall exult with my G-d."* — when affliction befalls me, only I am allowed to exult, for *"a person is obligated to make a blessing on adversity just as he makes a blessing on good."* But when misfortune befalls others, then not only am I forbidden to exult, I must seek out every way to empathize with them in their loss.

(Avodas Yisrael in Mayana shel Torah)



INSIGHTS INTO THE ZEMIROS
SUNG AT THE SHABBOS TABLE
THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS.

YOM ZEH MECHUBAD - scifn vz ouh
"THIS DAY IS HONORED..."

Six days you shall do your work
and the seventh is for your G-d

ששת ימים תעשה מלאכתך
יום השביעי לא-לוקיך

shayshes yamim ta'aseh m'lachtecha,
v'yom hashvi'i laylokecha

In contrast to the simple interpretation of the Fourth Commandment as permitting creative labor for six days and forbidding it on the seventh, Rabbi Bachya ben Asher (author of *Rabbeinu Bachya on Torah*) offers this fascinating insight which he heard in the name of Rambam:

During the six days of the week you are able to serve Hashem with your regular labors just as the forefathers who served Him with the tending of their cattle and other physical efforts. But on Shabbos your service is limited to desisting from any labor at all.

We echo this thought when we paraphrase the words of this commandment and follow it with the chorus that "this day is honored above all days because on it rested the Creator of the Universe."

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