

# LESSONS FROM A FAREWELL SPEECH

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

"You stand this day all of you before Hashem, your G-d; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger who is in your camp, from the chopper of your wood to the drawer of your water, that you should enter into a covenant with Hashem your G-d, and into His oath, which Hashem your G-d makes with you this day, that He may establish you today for a people to Himself, and that He may be to you a G-d, as He has said to you, and as He has sworn to your fathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov." (Devarim 29:9-11)

This portion of the Torah comes upon the heels of a chronicle of the curses to be heaped upon the nation of Israel should they not listen to G-d. The famed commentator Rashi explains the juxtaposition of these portions. When the nation of Israel heard all of the horrific curses that could befall them, their faces whitened with trepidation. "Who will be able to abide by all of this? How will we, as a nation survive?" Moshe had to comfort the nation. He reassured them that Hashem did not desire their destruction. "You are all gathered here today, standing before G-d," Moshe said. "Many have angered G-d, and look, you have not been destroyed, as here you are!"

Rav Gedalya Schorr explained that the point of the curses was not to threaten with the destruction of the nation of Israel. Rather, G-d desired that the nation always remember one important fact: That He was their G-d. Should they forget that, He would have to remind them, in a most unpleasant fashion. The pain and suffering forecast for the nation should they stray would force the people to recall who could help them out of the miserable situation in which they found themselves. They would be forced to recognize G-d as their savior and the One and Only in which they could trust and depend. The nation would then accept the yoke of G-d's rule upon themselves, and be subject to showers of blessings.

This portion, which is always read right before Rosh Hashanah, Rav Schorr points out, is a fitting prelude to the Day of Judgement. We are reminded that any harm and pain we suffered in the past year was ultimately for our benefit. G-d desires that we obey him out of love. He desires that we obey him on our own volition, without any prodding. However, when that does not happen, and we forget G-d, He may give us a not so gentle reminder to get us back on track. The punishment comes not out of anger, but rather out of care and concern. If we view the past year's anguish with this perspective, coming close to G-d in the time before and during the High Holidays is that much easier.

Rashi gives an additional explanation for what Moshe was attempting to accomplish with his speech to the nation at that point in time. He knew that his tenure as leader of the nation of Israel was about to come to a close. Moshe therefore desired to set forth a "monument" in order to encourage them to act properly. Moshe elaborated on all that occurred to the people in their travels and travails. He pointed out to them where they erred. He wanted to "straighten" the nation out so that they would begin on the right foot with their new leader, Yehoshua. The Chiddushei HaRim wrote that we must do the same for ourselves, each year. At the beginning of each year, we undertake to act in a specific way, based on our experiences in the past year. We must analyze our accomplishments and our failures, and understand what caused them to occur. We must undertake changes to rectify those failures, and fortify those actions that led to achievements. Just as Moshe worked to set the nation straight before they embarked on a new journey, so too must we work to set ourselves straight before we begin the new year.

There is one final lesson for this time period that Rav Schorr derives from Moshe's speech to the nation. "You stand this day all of you before Hashem, your G-d," Moshe began. Moshe was saying that the nation was a collective of all the individuals. Each person, when performing his own self-analysis, had to view how he acted as part of the whole. Did he meet his obligations to his brethren; did he act for the good of his people? Moshe did not stop there. "Your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives," each and every individual, Moshe said, had to look at themselves as such as well. Did he better himself, did he improve his character, and did he improve his relationship with G-d? When we review the past year's happenings, we must view our actions with two separate but related perspectives: from that of a member of the nation of Israel, a group, and from that of an isolated individual. Each person has duties to the nation and duties to himself. In order to assure that our repentance is complete, we must keep these two aspects in our sights when engaging in introspection.

Moshe's charge to the nation should help us remember, at this time of the year, that G-d loves us, that He wants to help us, and that we need to start our new year on the right track, seeking to better our people and ourselves.