

HOW TO REACH OUR POTENTIAL

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. The Jew Attains Clarity When He is Humbled

The Portion of Nitzavim begins with, "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d." Rashi cites Chazal who ask - 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.

We read in the Portion of Haazinu, "I have expended all of My arrows in them (Klal Yisroel)." The Yalkut (Midrash) explains that 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.

The Midrash says that 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 - that 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, says that 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."

2. The Process of Teshuvah

The Torah tells us that 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.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin states that 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.

The Torah states, "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." The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that 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. The Gemara tells us 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?

The Gemara in Tractate Menachos states that 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. The Gemara tells us that 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.

As we said last week, Rabbeinu Yona writes in his work Sharei Teshuvah (The Gates of Repentance) and in his commentary on Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers), that 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.

The Midrash on Shir Ha'Shirim (Song of Songs) interprets one of the opening verses 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 explains that 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 baali 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.

3. How does One Achieve His Spiritual Potential

The Torah tells us that in the Shmitta 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)". The Sforno in his commentary explains that "Shabbos L'Hashem" means that the Shmitta year should be a time of dedicating oneself to introspection, meditation, and the study of Torah. The

Shmitta 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 Shmitta 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 Hakhail. The Torah states that 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 Hakhail 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 Shmitta Cycle) as the time for the mitzvah of Hakhail. 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 Hakhail 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.

The Torah tells us that 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. The Talmud tells us, "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 Hakhail, one experienced the following sequence of events: the Shmitta 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 tell us that 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.

The verse in Shir Ha'Shirim (Song of Songs) states, "I am asleep but my heart is awake." Reb Chaim of Volozhin z'tl explains 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 explains that 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 writes in Hilchos Teshuvah (The Laws of Repentance) that 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.

4. How Far Away are We from that Special Level?

The Torah tells us that 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?

The Midrash in the introduction to Eichah (Lamentations) tells us that 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.

The Gemara in Tractate Avodah Zara tells us that if a person is a true heretic and later becomes a bal 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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