

# PLOTTING OUR COURSE FOR THE COMING YEAR

*by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch*

The Torah portions we are now reading from Devarim/Deuteronomy discuss Moses' contemplation and discussion of the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people immediately prior to their entry to the Promised Land. It is not coincidental that these portions fall out in the weeks between Tisha B'Av, the day of Jewish national mourning over the greatest calamities that have befallen our people, and the High Holidays, a time when we ourselves contemplate our actions of the past year and rechart the course of our relationship with the Creator of the Universe for the coming year.

In this week's portion Moses reminds the Jewish nation that "You have set apart Hashem (G-d) today to be a G-d for you, and to walk in His ways and to observe His decrees, His commandments and His statutes, and to hearken to His voice. And Hashem has set you apart today to be for him a treasured people..." (26:17-18) Rashi (R' Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, the commentator par excellence, whose commentary is considered basic to the understanding of the text) notes the concept of setting apart refers to Israel's setting itself apart from the strange, heathen gods that He should be our G-d and we have been separated from the nations of the world to be His treasured nation. Rashi's comparison is difficult to comprehend, for with respect to the Jewish nation it is possible to say that they were chosen from amongst the nations, but the Jews had the appreciation that G-d is the one and only true force in the universe, so what was the "choice"? Why are the words "set apart" apropos?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem in New York City; the leading Halachic/Jewish legal decisor of his time and foremost leader of Jewry) explains there are two levels in the service of G-d. Basic service comes from the belief in the existence of Hashem. But greater is when one's actions manifest clearly that Hashem rules over the world constantly, when our whole being and our deeds attest vividly to a Master of the Universe. In our age of democracy we are challenged to fully grasp the concept of mastery; when we choose a leader it is one who will carry out our will, not a ruler whose wishes we must obey. Here then is the separation, that the chosen nation of Israel must realize that that Hashem is the Master of the Universe and, thus, we must carry out His wishes and act accordingly.

Similarly, the parsha later (27:12) discusses the procedure that will take place when the nation reaches Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval in Israel and they accept upon themselves the blessing that will come with fulfillment of the Torah and the curses that come with its abandonment. Rashi quotes the Talmud in Tractate Sotah (32a) that states that one of the blessings would come for not making a

graven or molten image just as a curse is generated by creating a graven or molten deity. Again we are faced with imbalance: the rationale to punish for abandoning G-d for a molten image is clear, but why should we receive additional blessing for not exalting and worshiping a piece of stone or wood? Rabbi Feinstein elucidates that the graven and molten images epitomize the thought process that absolute control of the world no longer rests with G-d, rather with another entity. The Torah is reminding us that we must maintain our focus that our sustenance and livelihood are set on Rosh Hashanah and that our daily labors are simply the fulfillment of the curse to Adam, "By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread" (Beraishis/ Genesis 3:19). With this truth firmly embedded in our psyche we will not let our service of G-d suffer and fall to the wayside in our pursuit of income; we will not be misled into thinking we are the masters over ourselves, but rather will feel that Hashem is in control. With such an attitude, our material pursuits and priorities will be of a different nature.

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, considering our relationship with our Creator, this week's Torah portion assists our recalibration in our effort to plot a straight path for the coming year.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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