# TIMELY WORDS

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

It is said that one who lives with the parshas ha-shavuah (the weekly Torah reading) lives with the times. Within each weekly section there are hints and allusions which, if we attune ourselves to them, teach us how to serve Hashem specifically during the period of the year in which the parsha is read. If this is true with regard to other parshios, it is certainly applicable to this week's parsha - Nitzavim Va-yelech - which begins with the words, "Atem nitzavim ha-yom - You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d... " 'Today,' says the holy Zohar (2:32b), refers to Rosh Hashana. What message is there in the words of the opening verse of the parsha that will (hopefully) put us in the right frame of mind as we approach the New Year and the Days of Judgement and Awe?

It is said that a disciple of the holy Gaon of Vilna, R' Eliyahu zt"l, once asked him what the "best mussar sefer" to learn was (a mussar sefer is a book that teaches and encourages character refinement and self- scrutiny). The Gaon responded by naming a number of the eminent sefarim that deal with such issues. "But Rebbe," insisted the disciple, "which sefer is the very best?"

"I do not wish to pick favourites," responded the Gaon, "they are all worthwhile. One should set aside time every day to learn mussar and work on one's character. What I can tell you, however, is this: For me, the best 'mussar sefer' of all is right over there upon that wall." The disciple glanced at the shelving which held some of the Gaon's numerous sefarim, yet among them he could not locate even one sefer which would be termed a mussar sefer. They were all Talmudic commentaries.

"Rebbe," he said, "I'm not sure to which sefer you refer."

"My son, you misunderstood. When I said that my favourite mussar sefer was over there on the wall, I refer to the clock over there above the door. Every second of the day that clock ticks away, reminding me that time never stands still. When we're young, we think we'll never grow old. We think that time is a cheap commodity; not something to be valued. As one ages, and the years of his life pass by, he learns little by little how precious those fleeting moments are. While each tick of the clock on its own seems so small, the ticks add up. Tick by tick, moment by moment our lives are lived. We must grasp hold of time as best we can, before time grasps hold of us. No one knows when for him the last tick of the clock will sound, and his fleeting window of opportunity upon this world will come to a sudden end. So you see, my son, that for me is the biggest 'mussar sefer' of all!"

The concept of the "ticking mussar sefer," says the sefer Divrei Binah, is alluded to in the first pasuk of parshas Nitzavim. "You stand today... shivteichem, zikneichem - your tribes and your elders." The

word tribes, "shivteichem," can also mean a stick or rod, which, in the spirit of the "shevet mussar/rod of chastisement" (Mishlei/ Proverbs 22:15), is used to beat someone (or oneself) into submission. Thus: Shivteichem zikneichem - your (own) age should be for you the greatest "rod," for the time will come when you will wish you could have a few of those moments back, yet the clock on the wall just keeps on ticking...

On Rosh Hashana, a hefty part the Yom Tov is spent immersed in prayer. Everyone hopes that his prayers on Rosh Hashana should be full of meaning and depth. Sometimes, however, try as we might, our prayers "just don't go" - we simply don't feel the inspiration and the attachment we had hoped to. And when our prayers feel this way - empty and lacking - forcing the issue doesn't usually help. We can screw up our eyes and tense our forheads in mock concentration and intensity, yet in our hearts we know our prayers are empty. It can be a very frustrating experience. What is one to do?

Sefarim write that when one feels this way, it's often a sign that his prayers are focused within. Were he to pray not only for his own welfare and that of his family, but to think about Jews all over the world, and their needs and problems, then his heart would open up, and the feeling he was lacking would surely emerge. The Gemara says that while the Almighty doesn't always accept the prayers of an individual, the prayers of a community are always accepted (Berachos 8a). By the same token, the prayers of an individual, when he focuses not on himself but on his community, are guaranteed to be full of meaning and significance.

This concept, says R' Mordechai of Nadvorna zt"l (Ma'amar Mordechai), is also alluded to in the first pasuk of Nitzavim: You stand today - Rosh Hashana, in prayer. If you wish to ensure that your prayers will be meaningful and fulfilling, then the Torah advises: All of you before Hashem your G-d - make sure you keep others in mind, not just yourself.

One might be inclinded to think that by diverting his thoughts from himself and his family, and concentrating on the "greater good," he might in some way be detracting from his own needs. "If I'm not for myself," he asks, "who will be for me?" The Gemara confirms that in fact, the very opposite is true. "Anyone who prays for others, even though he too needs the same thing, he will be answered first. (Bava Kamma 92a)"

Focusing our prayers on others, especially on such an impactful day as Rosh Hashana, might not be something that comes easy or feels natural. Man is by nature a self-centered creature, and when the stakes are high, it's tough to focus on others and not on oneself. The benefits, however, both with regard to the inspiration of one's prayers and in their efficacy, are unmatchable. We're all in this together; let's keep each other in mind.

Have a good Shabbos.

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