

INSPIRATION - ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Why did the Torah juxtapose the parsha of "Atem Nitzavim/You are standing today before Hashem" with the curses (of last week's parsha)? Because when the Jews heard one-hundred-curses-less-two (98), their faces turned pale, and they said, "Who can bear these?" Moshe began to console them. "You are standing today..." although you have caused much distress to the Almighty, nevertheless He has never totally destroyed you, and you continue to exist before Him! (Midrash Tanchuma 1)

There are a number of exceptional particularities with the above Midrash: Why does the Midrash refer to the hundred-less-two curses found in last week's parsha, instead of ninety-eight? Furthermore, if one actually counts the curses, as the Midrash indeed does, one finds 100 curses and not 98! (K'li Yakar) Also, how great of a consolation is it to tell a person, to paraphrase, "You will suffer great calamities and indignities, but at least you will continue to exist?!" And perhaps most troubling is the following: Why would Moshe go to the bother of issuing the lengthy and hair-raising Tochacha (admonition) to which the Midrash refers, yet when it indeed has its desired effect, and the Jews are terrified by the consequences of sin, he backs off and in effect tells them, "Don't worry, it's not as bad as it sounds!"

The fact that there are in truth 100 curses forces us to say that there must be two exceptions: admonitions that at first-glance have the appearance of a curse, but upon closer examination are in fact blessings (notwithstanding the fact that, according to the holy Zohar, all the curses can ultimately be understood as deeply disguised blessings). Which two are the exceptions?

In the morning you will say, "If only evening would come!" Yet in the evening you will say, "If only morning would come!" - from the fright of your heart that you will fear and from the things your eyes will see. (28:15)

The holy Zohar (parshas Ki Savo, Ma'amar Havtachos ve-Nechamos she-be Mishneh Torah) says that these two curses - the curse of the morning and the curse of the evening - are the worst of all the curses. Basically, we will live in perpetual, undeviating fear, without any letup whatsoever. Can there be anything worse than a life which is no life at all; a life that contains not even a single moment of goodness or peace-of-mind?

The Zohar (ibid.), however, then makes a most interesting and perplexing statement: Within the place of greatest despair is found the concealed deliverance.

Ya'aros De-vash explains this enigmatic statement in light of the Mishna (Avos 2:10): Rabbi Eliezer says: Repent one day before you die! The Gemara (Shabbos 153a) relates that Rabbi Eliezer's disciples questioned his advice: How does one know when it's 'one day before he dies?' "Exactly!" he said. "Do teshuva today, for perhaps tomorrow you will die!"

Upon close reflection, he explains, what at first seems a depressing and disheartening thought, is in fact the key to serving Hashem be-simcha, with joy! What if, he says, we knew we only had one day to live? Would we use it to go shopping, check the news, read a good novel, engage in some idle chatter and perhaps a bit of nash and good cheer to wash it all down? Why bother working 9 to 5 (or 6 or 7 or later) and making some more money, if our next stop is a place where money and riches have no value?

All the more so if we consider how much (i.e. how little) we've accomplished thus far in our now soon-to-end sojourn upon the earth. Yet we've still got one day. Not a lot, but there's potential. If we squander the little we've got left - twenty-four hours - the loss will be eternal. Would we not, under such terms, find it relatively easy to overcome our usual penchant to fritter away our time and accomplish nothing? Any person with even the smallest amount of insight would do everything he possibly could to use that day to the best of his ability. He would spend his day immersed in Torah, tefilah (prayer), and teshuva (repentance). He would learn with his children, and try to impart to them the importance of being a shomer Torah u'mitzvos (observant Jew). His words would be spiked with the urgency and wisdom of one who has no time to spare, and who bears the mission of passing on the knowledge of a lifetime. His children and family would in turn sense the gravity of his words; they would not soon be forgotten.

This is why, explains the Ya'aros De-vash, in the place of greatest despair is found concealed deliverance. When one truly despairs of life, if one treats that despair not as a curse but as a blessing, he is "delivered," relieved from the never-ending senseless pursuit of material bliss and pleasure-seeking, and free to serve Hashem with a heart uninhibited by the daily grid that slowly eats away at our days and years, until we are left with nothing much to show for ourselves, save for a few pitchvkes and nick-knacks - minute morsels of goodness we've picked up along the way.

Of course we can't completely ignore life's daily needs and details. But if we lived each day with this attitude, how much of it would really matter? Would we care if the caterer botched up the centrepiece at our son's bar-mitzvah? The stained rug? The new Palm? If we lived today as if it were our last, how would our davening be different? Our Torah? Our attitude towards life? What would our last berachos be like? Our last Birkas Ha-mazon? Our last moments with our families? This sort of "despair" is one that indeed leads to salvation.

Accordingly, says the Yismach Moshe (parshas Nitzavim), we can understand why the Midrash refers to one-hundred-curses-less-two - for what at first seem to be 100 curses are in fact only 98. The "missing" two curses are the afformentioned - living every moment in fear and trepidation. Not the

crippling, debilitating fear the Jews first understood it to mean, but rather an awe of the value of each moment we are given, and hopefully the insight to treat life with the respect it deserves, each moment as if it were our last.

This, too, explains the consolation hidden in Moshe's words: You have caused much distress to the Almighty - consider how little you've accomplished thus far, and yet: You continue to exist - spared another moment, at least, to repair that which you have damaged, and to accomplish as much as you can with the time you have left. Atem Nitzavim Ha-yom/You stand before Hashem today - live each day as if today's the day, and the fear of the curses which so grips you can be harnessed to bring you the greatest blessing possible; life itself!

Have a good Shabbos.

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