

PAYING ATTENTION TO THE VOICE OF THE ALMIGHTY

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Parshios Netzavim & Elul / Rosh Hashanah

Paying Attention to the Voice of the Almighty

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 649, Minhagim of the Yomim Noraim. Good Shabbos!

"And it will be when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse - that I have placed before you, then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you." [Devorim 30:1]

I think that perhaps the most appropriate reaction to this occasion is the words of Parshas Nitzavim. The pasukim [verses] talk about a person who fails to react to *"all these curses"*. It speaks of one who -- upon hearing the words of the previously presented imprecation - blesses himself in his heart saying: *"Peace will be with me, for I walk along as my heart sees fit."* [Devorim 29:18] G-d will not be willing to forgive the person who does not react to the curse he has witnessed [Devorim 29:19].

In any year, Parshas Nitzavim always has a profound impact, as the last parsha before Rosh HaShannah. In the context in which we stand following the horrific events of the past week, it is only necessary to read the verses.

"And you will return to Hashem your G-d and hearken to His voice." [Devorim 30:2]. The first step of repentance is to hearken to His voice (v'sha-mata b'kolo). Perhaps this is not to be interpreted as we normally would, to listen to His voice and fulfill His commandments. *"You shall hearken to His voice"* means that when the Almighty speaks to us we need to pay attention.

When Hashem speaks through natural phenomenon or through historical events, we must attune

our ears, lift up our antenna, and receive His message. This is the first step in Teshuva [repentance].

The Talmud says that thunder was only created in order to straighten out the crookedness and perversions in a person's heart. [Berachos 59a] When a person hears a clap of thunder and flinches, the experience may give him pause. When the Chofetz Chaim, zt"l, used to hear thunder he would ask "What does Father want?" (Vos vill der Tata?)

If the Chofetz Chaim was alive today and he saw and heard what happened this week, what would he do? If he even saw the Voice of Hashem in a clap of thunder, what would he say to the events of this last week? Vos vill der Tata? What does Father want?!

There is a strange passage in Tractate Avodah Zarah [18a]: Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion asked Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma "Am I destined to go to Olam Haba [the World to Come]?" Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma responded, "Did you ever do anything special?" [This, mind you, is the same Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion who publicly taught Torah against the edict of the Roman Government forbidding Torah study.] Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion responded: "I once had Purim money (for my personal Purim meal) that got mixed up with money I set aside for charity. I then gave the entire sum away to poor people." Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma responded, "If that is the case, may my portion in the World to Come be as great as your portion. You are certainly destined to go to Olam HaBah!"

What does this Gemara mean? I once saw a unique interpretation. Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion saw in this incident that the Almighty was trying to tell him something. The Master of the Universe was sending him a message. The message was that really this money (that he had set aside for his Purim meal) should be given to charity. Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion was so sensitive and so open and receptive to Heavenly messages that in that small, almost trivial incident he recognized that "the Almighty is trying to tell me something." Rabbi Yosi said, "If that is the case -- if in such a small little incident you see and you hear the Hand of G-d, I can be confident that you are destined for the World to Come. It is obvious that you go through life in such a way that when G-d merely taps you on the shoulder you hear it and you get the message.

It is about hearing such messages that the Torah states in this week's parsha "*And you shall hear His Voice*" (v'sha-mata b'kolo).

"And with a great shofar blast He shall blow and with a small silent voice He shall be heard" [Yomim Noraim liturgy]. Do we ever stop to consider the paradox of the contrast in this pasuk from our High Holiday prayers? If He blows with a great shofar blast, why is it then only a small little voice that we hear? If the shofar blast is so powerful that even the angels tremble from it, then when it reaches us, why is it only perceived as a small silent voice (kol demama daka)?

This is the nature of people. The Almighty could give out the loudest blast possible. It could be a cataclysmic event, but we only hear the small silent voice. People can react in all sorts of ways, but are they hearing the Voice of Hashem? Are they asking the one simple question: What does Father want?

We heard tonight all sorts of suggestions as to what our reaction must be from people who are far greater than us. Some suggest it has to be a strengthening of the honor of the synagogue and the honor of prayer. Others suggest an increased diligence in avoiding monetary improprieties. Still others suggest it must be restraint in expenses when it comes to Simchas. One hears a variety of suggestions.

I say one thing. **DO SOMETHING**. We cannot let an event like this go by and not do **SOMETHING**. I told the students in my class, who are for the most part between 20 and 23 years old, that every generation has an event that is seared into the collective memory of that generation. To my father's generation it was September 1, 1939. Every year on that day, my father would say "Today Hitler invaded Poland." For my generation it was November 22, 1963 (the day John Kennedy was assassinated). In the sum total of history it is probably an insignificant event, but it is something that everyone of my generation remembers. For this generation it is and will be September 11, 2001.

It was a cataclysmic event. No one knows how this is going to play out. No one knows whether this is the first volley of the Final War. No one knows whether this is going to be "good for the Jews" or "bad for the Jews". No one knows whether the initial reaction of "blame those Arabs" will prevail or whether the secondary reaction will be "but it is because of those Jews." No one knows whether this economy that is already teetering on the cusp of a recession will now be thrown into the throes of a full depression. No one knows.

But let us not make the collective mistake of just letting this moment pass. When the Ribono shel Olam has spoken to us more clearly than He has in decades, we must listen. The last time this country lost more than 3,000 people in one day was during the Civil War! If we don't hear this, we are spiritually dead. If we don't respond, we are beyond help.

Don't make the mistake of saying "Well, who says it's because we talk during davening! Who says? How do you know?" Don't make the mistake of saying: "What does this have to do with spending too much money on weddings? What does this have to do with Lashon Hara [slander]? What does this have to do with bitul Torah [wasting time from Torah study]?"

I don't care. One thing I do know. If after 120 years, I go to Heaven and stand before the Heavenly Throne and they ask me "What did you do in the aftermath of this day?" and I tell them that I did such and such, and they tell me "That was not the correct reaction to why this happened," I'll know how to respond. I will say, "I'm sorry. I did not have a prophet. I did not have a proper spiritual guide. I just listened to the great men of my generation and did what they told me. This is what I thought. What else could I do? I tried."

I do not know for sure how Judgment works up there, but I am fairly confident that the Almighty will accept such an answer. "I tried; I did **SOMETHING**" is an acceptable answer. But if I go up there and I say: "I did not do anything," and they will exclaim "How could you not do anything?" What will I say? "Because I was unsure what to do. I did not know for sure. Therefore, I did nothing and my life did not

change when I saw such an event." Heaven forbid what the Almighty might say if we offer such a response.

This is my message: Whatever it is - **DO SOMETHING!** The Ribono shel Olam talked to us like he has not spoken to us in generations. Do not ignore your father when He speaks to you! Do not just walk out of the room.

"Yes father. What do you want? I am going to do something, father, because I know you want something. I do not know exactly what you want, but I know you want something." A person that always asks himself "What does Father want?" is guaranteed a place in the World to Come.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The halachic topics dealt with in the portion of Nitzavim-Vayelech in the Commuter Chavrusah Series are the following:

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