

"THE MAN WHO BLESSES HIMSELF IN HIS HEART SAYING..." WASN'T TOTALLY WRONG

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Parshios Netzavim & Vayeilech

"The Man Who Blesses Himself In His Heart Saying..." Wasn't Totally Wrong

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tapes 825, The Shuls of Gaza -- A Halachic Perspective and 826, Yom Kippur: Women and the Shecheyanu. Good Shabbos!

In Parshas Nitzavim, the Almighty warns Klal Yisrael that they are about to enter a land in which there is going to be an abundance of idolatry. "And you have seen their detestable things, and their idols, wood and stone, silver and gold, which were with them. Lest there should be among you man or woman or family or tribe whose heart turns away this day from the L-rd our G-d to go to serve the gods of those nations; lest there should be among you a rot that bears gall and wormwood; and it shall come to pass when he hears the words of the curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying: 'I shall have peace, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart -- that the watered be swept away with the dry'. The L-rd will not be willing to pardon him, but then the anger of the L-rd and His jealousy shall be kindled against that man and all the curse that is written in this book shall lie upon him and the L-rd shall blot out his name from under Heaven and the L-rd shall separate him out from all the Tribes of Israel because of his behavior." [Devorim 29:16-20]

There is one thing about those pasukim that does not seem to make sense. After the person hears all this and is warned clearly and graphically of the punishment for serving the gods of the indigent nations of Canaan, how can the person "bless himself in his heart and say 'I shall have peace, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart'"? What could he be thinking? The Almighty warns him and tells him not to do this lest all these curses befall him!

We might understand a stubborn person's response to be I do not care; I do not believe in G-d; or something of that nature. However, this person hears the curse, he accepts it, but assures himself in the recesses of his heart "everything will be okay with me". What is he thinking?

The Ibn Ezra asks this question and explains this person's theological error. The person believes that he will be able to coast along on the righteousness of the Tzadikim, who are numerous and thereby will counter balance his own wickedness when the Day of Judgment arrives. That is why the pasuk says, "Therefore the L-rd will not be willing to pardon this person." G-d will separate out this individual from the righteous masses and punish him individually.

Theoretically, this schemer is right. There is indeed great power in being part of a community. It is only because G-d warns "I am not going to accept that", that this plan will fail. In theory, however, the plan had logic to it. It is valid to believe that being part of a Tzibur [community] gives one protection.

The Mir Yeshiva was the only European Yeshiva to survive the Holocaust of World War II intact. They travelled from Poland to Lithuania, to Russia, across Siberia, to Kobe Japan and then to Shanghai where they spent several years during the war. They did all their travels together as a community. The administration of the Yeshiva told everyone to stay together as a Tzibur in order to survive. They emphasized this idea to the extent that when things were still "semi-normal" and it was Succoth bein haZemanim [between sessions], the Yeshiva did not allow any bochur [student] to go home for Succoth but rather insisted that they remain together with the Yeshiva as a strategy for survival. For the same reason, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz told the students they all had to learn in the same Beis Medrash (study hall) so that they should have the power of the community and the merit of the community as protection.

This is why they made it. Even though individually, each student may not have been worthy, such is the segulah [special treasure] protection of being part of a bigger community.

This is the thought process of the misguided Jew who believes "peace will come to me (despite my waywardness)". "I am so confident in the merit of the community that I believe I can get away with my sins and still live in peace." He would be right if not for G-d's specific warning in this situation.

The Zohar states this same idea in Parshas Noach and advises individuals against seeking preferential treatment in Heaven at the time of Judgment. The Zohar focuses in on the story of Elisha and his Shunamite hostess as recorded in Melachim II Chapter 4. According to the Zohar, Elisha was staying at her house during the holiday of Rosh HaShanah, a time when the Almighty was judging the world. Elisha asked her "Can I speak to the King on your behalf?" [Melachim II 4:13] The simple reading of this pasuk is that he is referring to seeking a political favor for her from the King of Israel. However, the Zohar interprets the word "King" here to refer to the Holy One Blessed Be He.

The Shunamite woman could never refuse this offer! The great prophet offered to intercede on her behalf, with a request to the King of Kings, on the Day of Judgment! Which of us would not accept that offer? Yet, the Shunamite woman turns Elisha down and replies "(No thank you.) In the midst of my people do I dwell". She responds, according to the Zohar, that she would prefer judgment as part of the community than to have her individual case brought before the Almighty, even by a prophet speaking on her behalf. When one is singled out (s)he has to stand on (her/) his own merits -- all of

one's sins are examined alongside all of one's good deeds. Judgment as part of a community is a much more benign process.

Similarly, Rav Leizer Yudel Finkel (the son of the Alter from Slabodka), the Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Europe and in Eretz Yisrael did not sit on the Eastern Wall of the Yeshiva (at least on the High Holidays). He wanted to pray in the spirit of "in the midst of my people do I dwell" (like the words of the Shunamite woman).

This technique of identifying oneself with the community at large is one of the time-honored Segulahs to emerge meritorious from the Judgment of Heaven. May we each find appropriate ways to attach ourselves to the community, to become more part of the tzibur, and to do for the tzibur so that the merit of the community will protect as we approach the upcoming Days of Judgment.

A Torah Leader's Job Is Never Over

Parshas Vayelech takes place on the last day of Moshe Rabbeinu's life. On the day of his death, Moshe Rabbeinu chastised the nation (gave them mussar) and told them "I know that after I die you will stray from the path I have commanded you." This is the end of Moshe's career. He began his leadership of the Jewish people when he was 80 years old. He is now 120 years old, having led Klal Yisrael for 40 years. The last 4 books of the Torah have really been the story of his life -- "Torat Moshe." We have followed his career, all he has done for Klal Yisrael and all the mussar he has given to them over the years. For 40 years, he has been trying to straighten out the wayward and stiff-necked nation.

Today is the last day of his life. "I'm retiring." He is going to die. One would think, "Enough already!" It seems somewhat strange that on the last day of his life he needs to warn them "Watch out! Do not do it! I know that you are going to go off the path and bad things will happen to you!" Why should he have to worry about that at this point? He is "giving over the keys" to Yehoshua. Let Yehoshua worry about all that!

Yet Moshe feels this need to warn his flock about what is going to happen after he is already dead.

This can be compared to the following incident involving Rav Yisrael Salanter. There was a certain city in Lithuania where wealthy individuals always made their weddings in a very fancy hall (the "New York Hilton" of its day). There was a shoemaker in town who, somehow came into a lot of money. When his daughter was going to get married, even though he had never been a wealthy man, he decided that he too would make his wedding in this fancy location. The other wealthy people in town were aghast when they received their invitations. They were insulted that this former pauper, who they did not feel was in "their club" now was making a wedding in the same elegant hall they used for their daughters' weddings.

Someone was so repulsed by this that when the shoemaker was about to march his daughter down the aisle to the Chuppah, he went over to him, removed his own shoe and asked, "How much does it

cost to re-sole this shoe?" The person wanted to humiliate the shoemaker and make him feel "You were a shoemaker; you are a shoemaker; you will always be a shoemaker."

When Rav Yisrael Salanter heard this, he commented that the Torah greats (the "Gedolim") of that generation who are already in the "World of Truth" will be summoned to Judgment for having raised a generation of people with such cruelty and such insensitivity. A person who was a leader in a generation where one Jew could be so mean to another would have to give accounting for his negligence in leadership, despite the fact that he already was in Gan Eden.

This was Moshe Rabbeinu's concern. He knew he was already going to die and that his job was over. However, the job of a person who has been a leader of Klal Yisrael does not end even after he leaves this world. Moshe was worried that after he leaves this world, Klal Yisrael would sin and he would be called to accounting for not having trained them better. Therefore, on the day Moshe died, despite the fact that "his job was over" nevertheless, he wanted to give them mussar that they should not stray from the proper path.

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