**SALT – PARASHAT NITZAVIM 5782 / 2022**

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Motzaei Shabbat

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe foresees the time when, after *Benei Yisrael* are exiled from their land on account of their wrongdoing, they will repent and return to *mitzva* observance, whereupon God will bring them back to the land. He assures the people, “The Lord your God will place these curses [which you had suffered] upon your enemies and foes who had pursued you. And you shall return and heed the Lord’s voice, and perform all His commands…” (30:7-8). While the enemy nations suffer calamity because of their hostility, *Am Yisrael* will enjoy peace and prosperity because of their repentance (see Seforno).

Rav Binyamin of Zalozitz, in *Torei Zahav*, suggests an additional insight into this prophecy, noting the word “*ve-ata*” – “and you,” which appears to emphasize that specifically “you” will repent and return to observance. This word, the Maggid of Zalozitz explains, exhorts the sinner to repent as he is currently, rather than wait until he becomes somebody else. One should not delay the process of repentance and change until the time when he no longer experiences the temptation to commit the sins he currently commits. Rather, we are to repent now, the way we are. The obligation of *teshuva* requires us to correct our present personalities; it does not suffice to wait until we naturally become different people. People might sometimes feel that current circumstances, or their current mindset or character, do not allow for change. The emphasis of “***ve-ata*** *tashuv*” teaches us that *teshuva* is for each and every one of us in our present situation, that regardless of whatever spiritual struggles and challenges we might be facing, we can – and must – work to change our habits and correct our behavior, without waiting for a change of circumstances. *Teshuva* is accessible to, and expected of, the people who we are right now, and is not reserved only for our future selves.

Sunday

In the beginning of Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe warns of the consequences of violating the covenant with God, the harsh punishments that God would deliver in response to the people’s betrayal. He concludes this section by declaring, “That which is hidden is for the Lord our God, but that which is revealed is for us and our children for all time…” (29:28). Rashi explains this to mean that although *Benei Yisrael* are responsible for one another, we are held accountable only for “revealed” misdeeds, for those which we knew about and could have prevented, but not for those done secretly, in hiding, without our knowledge. The “hidden” violations are “for the Lord” to punish, whereas the “revealed” violations are blamed on us all if we knew about them and were in a position to stop them.

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, in *Maor Va-shemesh*, offers an additional explanation of this verse. He writes that fundamentally, our service of God should be done privately, out of public view. The *Maor Va-shemesh* cites a teaching of the Arizal that the gratitude and reverence we owe the Almighty are limitless, such that they cannot possibly be articulated. Hence, in principle, prayer should be done silently, because our feelings for God cannot be properly expressed through the spoken word. However, we must verbally express these feelings in order to publicize our awareness and praise of God, to bring Him glory and to inspire others to devote themselves to His service. Similarly, the *Maor Va-shemesh* writes, our service of God must be directed inward, and experienced privately, rather than being put on display. At the same time, of course, there is great importance to public religious activity, which brings glory to God and which provides inspiration for others. However, our priority must be not making public displays of religious devotion, but rather cultivating genuine, inner devotion. The verse therefore exhorts, “*Ha-nistarot l-Hashem Elokeinu*,” that we must serve God in a hidden, concealed manner, without anybody seeing or noticing, and “*ha-niglot lanu u-l-vaneinu ad olam*” – our outward displays of religiosity must be geared solely toward the goal of impacting our children and others, in order to ensure the eternal continuity of our faith and traditions.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Nitzavim foresees *Benei Yisrael*’s repentance in exile, and promises that God will respond by bringing them back to their homeland. Thereafter, the Torah assures that God will assist them in their process of repentance: “The Lord your God shall ‘circumcise’ your heart…to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul…” (30:6). Once the people begin returning to observance, God will then step in to mold their hearts so they remain devoted and loyal. The Ramban cites in reference to this verse the Gemara’s famous teaching in Masekhet Shabbat (104a), “*Ha-ba li-taher mesaye’in oto*” – “One who seeks to be purified is assisted.” Once we make the first steps, resolving to try to improve our conduct, God will then assist us in this process by molding our hearts so we are naturally drawn to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

The Rebbe of Kotzk raised the question as to how to reconcile this promise with Moshe’s exhortation to *Benei Yisrael* earlier in Sefer Devarim (10:16): “*U-maltem eit orlat levavkhem*” – “You shall ‘circumcise’ the ‘foreskin’ of your heart.” In this earlier verse, it seems that the responsibility to “circumcise” our hearts lies with us; this is a goal which we are called upon to achieve on our own. Here in Parashat Nitzavim, however, it seems like this stage is take care of by the Almighty once we’ve begun the process of repentance. From this verse it appears that only God can thoroughly transform our hearts, whereas the earlier verse implies that this is something which God expects us to do.

The Rebbe of Kotzk suggested reconciling these two verses by noting a subtle distinction between the two metaphors. In the earlier verse, we are called upon to “circumcise” the “*orla*” (“foreskin”) of our hearts. This refers to the “coverings” that we place upon our hearts that block inspiration, and thus prevent real change. Here in Parashat Nitzavim, by contrast, the Torah speaks not of “*orlat levavkhem*” – “the ‘foreskin’ of your heart,” but rather just the heart itself. The Kotzker Rebbe explained that our responsibility is to remove the “*orla*,” the thick layers of coverings over our hearts. As the verse there continues, “*ve-orphekhem lo takshu od*” – “and stiffen your necks no more.” We are to eliminate the arrogance, the cynicism and the laziness that make change impossible. Our obligation is to prepare our hearts to be changed by opening our minds, by humbly acknowledging that our habits and routines might be flawed, that some of the decisions we have made are wrong and need to be reversed. As the Torah indicates here in Parashat Nitzavim, only God can change our hearts, our nature, our instincts and our drives. However, in order for this happen, we must work to remove the “*orla*,” the stubbornness and apathy that make our hearts impenetrable. Once we’ve opened our minds, when we humbly accept that we are flawed and that we can and must improve, and we show a preparedness to leave our comfort zone and change, we can then petition to God to “circumcise” our hearts, to help us become the people who we want to be and are supposed to be.

Tuesday

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe assures *Benei Yisrael* that even if they are exiled from their land because of their having betrayed God, He will bring them back to their homeland after they repent. He emphasizes that even if they are exiled to “the edge of the heavens,” to the remotest regions, “from there shall the Lord your God gather you, and from there shall He take you” (30:4).

Netziv, in *Ha’ameik Davar*, raises the question as to the meaning of the final word in this verse – “*yikachekha*” (“shall He take you”). Once Moshe promised that God would “gather” (“*yekabetzkha*”) the people, what does he add with the term “*yikachekha*”?

Netziv creatively answers this question based on a verse in the final chapter of Sefer Yeshayahu (66:21), in which Yeshayahu prophesies about the ingathering of the exiles, and conveys God’s promise, “*Ve-gam meihem ekach la-kohanim la-leviyim*” – that He will take people “even from among them” to minister in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Although *Benei Yisrael* will be scattered throughout the world, dispersed among other peoples, leading to a decline in religious standards, nevertheless, God will welcome select individuals from the remnants of the Jewish Nation as His servants in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Netziv suggests that just as Yeshayahu uses the word “taking” to mean appointing as *kohanim* and *Leviyim*, here in Parashat Nitzavim, too, Moshe promises that God will “take” members of *Benei Yisrael* to serve in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* despite their having lived “at the edge of the heavens,” in remote regions, where religious life was difficult to maintain. *Benei Yisrael* should not think that after living for many years in small, struggling communities among gentiles, they would be unworthy of rebuilding religious life in their homeland. God promises them that even after they will have lived for many years “at the edge of the heavens,” God would lovingly “take them” to be His servants in the newly-built *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

This understanding of Moshe’s prophecy is relevant on the individual level, as well. We should never fear that once we’ve drifted to “the edge of the heavens,” away from devotion to God, He is no longer interested in our service. He promises to “take” us from wherever we are, to lift us from the depths to which we have fallen, welcome us to the “*Beit Ha-mikdash*” and invite us to serve Him. The opportunity of *teshuva* is made available to each and every one of us, even to those who have strayed to the remotest regions, assuring us that we are worthy of serving our Creator regardless of the mistakes we have made in the past once we make the decision to return.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted Moshe’s promise in Parashat Nitzavim (30:4) that even if *Benei Yisrael* find themselves exiled “*bi-ktzei ha-shamayim*” – “at the edge of the heavens,” God would nevertheless bring them back to their homeland: “from there shall the Lord your God gather you, and from there shall He take you” (30:4).

Malbim explains the metaphor “*bi-ktzei ha-shamayim*” – “at the edge of the heavens” – as referring to the furthermost distance, the remotest possible locations, from which returning seems entirely impossible. Moshe assured the people that no matter how far they are driven from the Land of Israel, God will bring them back to their homeland.

Rav Avraham Bentzion Borenstein, in *Resisei Tal*, suggests an additional insight into this verse, noting that Moshe speaks here of “the edge of the heavens,” as opposed to “the edge of the earth.” Significantly, Moshe envisions *Benei Yisrael* being driven not to a remote geographic location here on earth, but to a point where they cannot even be said to be on the earth at all. Rav Borenstein boldly proposes that this alludes to the misconception that will develop over the years of exile that *Am Yisrael* does not need its homeland. Having grown accustomed to exile, and to practicing Torah law and tradition outside the Land of Israel, Jews might begin to assume that they can live complete Torah lives without a land. They will thus find themselves “at the edge of the heavens” – with the assumption that they have no need to return to *Eretz Yisrael*. Not only would they be geographically distant from the Land of Israel, but they would be mentally and emotionally distant, as well, as though they were in the “heavens,” not connected to any piece of land. Moshe here assures *Benei Yisrael* that even if they reach the point where they feel no need to return to their ancestral homeland, God will bring them there. *Am Yisrael*’s mission is not meant to be realized in the “heavens,” apart from a geographical territory. It is inextricably bound with the Land of Israel, and we are thus promised that even after we acclimate to life in exile, to the point where we no longer feel the need for a national homeland in which to observe the Torah, we will be brought there so that we can achieve our mission in the place and in the manner in which it is to be achieved.

Thursday

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe warns of the calamities that God would bring upon *Benei Yisrael* if they breached their covenant with Him by worshipping foreign deities. He foresees the Land of Israel being destroyed “like the overturning of Sedom, Amora, Adma and Tzevoyim, which the Lord overturned in His wrath and rage” (29:22). This refers, of course, to the annihilation of Sedom and its surrounding cities, which the Torah describes in Sefer Bereishit (19:24-25). Moshe then predicts that the other nations, upon witnessing the devastation, will wonder, “For what reason did the Lord do such to this land?” The answer will then be given, “On account of their abandonment of the covenant of the Lord, God of their forefathers” (29:24).

Rav Shmuel Aharon Yudelevitz, in *Me’il Shemuel*, offers an insightful explanation of the sequence of these verses. He suggests that the question, “For what reason did the Lord do such to this land?” will be asked in response not to the land’s desolation per se, but rather to its resemblance to the annihilation of Sedom. Those who ask this question will surely understand that God exiled His people on account of their wrongdoing, but they will fail to understand why *Benei Yisrael* deserved the same fate as the wicked city of Sedom and its neighboring towns. *Benei Yisrael*’s sinfulness would not fall to anywhere near the level of evil which characterized the population of Sedom. The other nations will therefore wonder why God would deliver upon His nation the same calamities that befell the degenerate people of Sedom.

The answer to this question is, “On account of their abandonment of the covenant of the Lord.” While *Benei Yisrael*’s misconduct was far less grievous than the crimes of Sedom, nevertheless, they bore the same degree of guilt, because their misdeeds – relatively mild as they were – constituted a breach of their covenant. They betrayed God with whom they had forged a special relationship. We might draw an analogy to wrongs committed against a spouse, with whom one had entered into a “covenant,” a formal bond whereby the two parties mutually committed to treat one another with special love, care and respect. Mistreating a spouse is a far graver wrong than mistreating somebody else, by virtue of the betrayal involved. Likewise, even though *Benei Yisrael* never fell to the depths of depravity that characterized the society of Sedom, nevertheless, they deserved the same fate because their wrongdoing marked a breach of their covenant with God.

Rav Yudelevitz concludes his discussion by noting that these verses perhaps serve as a warning not to feel content meeting the standards of other societies. We must always remember that we have entered into a covenant with God, such that even relatively mild infractions comprise a breach and a betrayal. We are to hold ourselves to a higher, stricter standard of conduct, to the standard set for us by the Torah, without ever setting the bar according to the standards deemed adequate by other societies.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Nitzavim foresees the time when, after *Benei Yisrael* had been exiled from their land on account of their breach of their covenant with God, they will repent, whereupon God would bring them back to their homeland. Moshe promises that God will then assist the people to complete the process of repentance: “The Lord your God will ‘circumcise’ your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul…” (30:6). *Targum Onkelos* interprets the metaphor of the “circumcision” of the people’s hearts to mean that God will “remove the foolishness of your heart.” Just as circumcision entails the removal of the foreskin from the male organ, God assures us that once we initiate the process of repentance, He will remove the “foolishness” in our hearts that leads us to act wrongly.

Interestingly, the promise is that God will “circumcise” not only the people’s hearts, but also the hearts of their offspring (“*ve-et levav zar’ekha*”). Netziv, in *Ha’ameik Davar*, explains that Moshe added these words to allay the people’s concerns that their descendants would be unworthy of God’s special assistance. They might have assumed that only they would deserve to have their hearts molded by God. Moshe therefore emphasized that even the later generations, who would not maintain the original generation’s level of piety, would be granted God’s assistance once they initiate the process of *teshuva*.

Rav Nissan Zweibel, in his *Palgei Mayim* (vol. 2, p. 39), adds a different insight into the mention of the people’s offspring in this verse. He brings a number of sources – including a passage in the Ramban’s commentary here in Parashat Nitzavim (29:17) – establishing that a person’s misdeeds have an effect on his offspring, even generations later. Sin has a certain corrosive impact that, to one extent or another, influences future descendants. Therefore, when God promises to assist us in our efforts to repent, He assures us also that He will assist our offspring, who are impacted by our wrongdoing. Just as He will help us cleanse our souls from the negative effects of our transgressions, He will likewise step in to neutralize the negative effects that these sins could have upon our progeny.

When we come before God and beg for forgiveness, we ask not only for atonement, that our personal guilt will be erased, but also that the adverse impact of our actions will be reversed. We acknowledge that our wrongdoing not only leaves us liable to punishment, but also, on one level or another, negatively affects our surroundings. We must aspire to bring blessing to the world, to be a source of blessing and goodness, to leave a positive and meaningful impact on mankind. When we sin, we have the diametric opposite effect, as we introduce more impurity and negative forces into the world. Our process of repentance must therefore include a heartfelt plea that God erase the harmful impact of our misconduct, that He reverse the negative effects of our actions, so that we can realize our aspirations of bringing only blessing to the rest of humanity.