**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NITZAVIM**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe warns of the time when *Benei Yisrael* will forsake God and worship idols, whereupon He would respond by destroying the Land of Israel and driving them into exile. Moshe then concludes, ambiguously, “The hidden things are for the Lord our God, but the revealed things are for us and our children, forever, to observe all the words of this Torah” (29:28).

Rashi and several other commentators (such as Ibn Ezra, the Rashbam and Seforno), based on the Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (43b), explain that Moshe refers here to the difference between public and private idol-worship. *Benei Yisrael* are held accountable for public breaches of the covenant which they are able to oppose and eliminate, but they are assured that God will not hold them accountable for secret idol-worship. Although Moshe here sternly warns of the consequences of breaching the covenant, he assures them that they are responsible only for the violations of which they are aware and that they are able to prevent.

The Ramban explains differently, noting the verse in Sefer Tehillim (19:13) in which the word “*nistarot*” is used in reference to accidental violations (“*Shegiot mi yavin mi-nistarot nakeini*”). According to the Ramban, Moshe here assures the people that God will hold them accountable only for their intentional violations of God’s commands, and not for unintended breaches.

*Chatam Sofer* explains that Moshe speaks here of the contrast between our outward conduct and our “hidden” intentions and feelings. Much of what we do over the course of the day does not appear religiously driven. Our efforts to earn a livelihood and caring for our and our families’ needs seem mundane and bereft of spiritual meaning. Moshe here instructs that “*ha-nistarot le-Hashem Elokeinu*” – our “hidden” thoughts and feelings should be directed toward God, even while “*ha-niglot lanu u-l-vnaeinu*” – when we outwardly appear to be caring solely for our personal needs and those of our families, without striving for any higher purpose. Although we spend a good part of the day working for a livelihood and tending to our bodies, our homes and our families, all this activity should, inwardly, be directed to God. Outwardly, all this work appears ordinary and mundane, but in our minds, it should be regarded as sacred, undertaken for the sake of, as the verse concludes, “observing all the words of this Torah” – fulfilling our God-given mission in the world and serving Him to the very best of our ability.

Sunday

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe warns of the consequences of the people abandoning God, and foresees how, after they will be driven into exile, people will look back and reflect upon the calamities that had befallen *Benei Yisrael*. They will be told that *Benei Yisrael* abandoned God and embraced other beliefs, and so “the Lord was incensed at that land… And the Lord uprooted them from their land…and cast them to a different land, as this day” (29:27).

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch interprets this final clause – “*va-yashlikheim el eretz acheret*” (“He cast them to a different land”) – as not merely ascribing the exile to God. Rather, in Rav Hirsch’s words, “Wherever they [*Benei Yisrael*] are that is not their original homeland, and wherever they may find themselves, they are not there just by chance. The God of the history of men and nations has ‘cast’ them there.” The implication of this phrase, according to Rav Hirsch, is that God did not scatter *Am Yisrael* into exile randomly. Wherever our nation has been is where we were supposed to be, where God wanted us to be, as Rav Hirsch writes, “to serve amongst the nations His Purposes for mankind.”

Rav Hirsch proposes a theory on this basis to explain why the letter *lamed* in the word “*va-yashlikheim*” (“cast them”) is traditionally enlarged in the Torah scroll. Perhaps, he writes, this is done so that the *lamed* overshadows the preceding letter (*shin*), so that the word can be also read as “*va-yolikheim*” – “He led them.” The Torah here subtly emphasizes that God specifically leads us at all times. Wherever we happen to find ourselves having to go, it is Providence that had us go there to fulfill a special mission at that time and place.

Rav Hirsch’s comments to this verse bring to mind a famous insight of Rav Eliyahu Meir Bloch in reference to the story of David and Yehonatan in Sefer Shemuel I (20). As King Shaul – Yehonatan’s father – began acting hostile towards David, Yehonatan devised a plan whereby he would determine whether his father indeed sought to kill David, and then discreetly relay this information to David. He told David the signal he would give if David needed to escape, saying that if he gave this signal, “Go, because the Lord has sent you” (Shemuel I 20:22). Rav Bloch noted that Yehonatan did not say, “Escape,” but rather, “Go, because the Lord has sent you.” Wherever we need to go, Rav Bloch explained, we must feel as though we are being sent there by the Almighty. We never end up anywhere by chance; wherever we are, we have been “cast” there by God for a purpose. It is our responsibility to try to find the opportunities in every situation into which we are “cast” and take full advantage of them to achieve to the best of our ability.

Monday

Parashat Nitzavim features a famous series of verses (30:11-14) in which Moshe assures the people that “this commandment which I command you this day” is neither “in the heavens” nor “across the sea,” but is rather “very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform.” The Ramban famously explains that the “commandment” of which Moshe speaks is the obligation of *teshuva* (repentance), the topic of the previous section, in which Moshe foresaw the time when *Benei Yisrael* would be exiled on account of their sins, and then repent. After promising the people that God would lovingly accept their repentance, he now emphasizes that “this commandment” – the obligation to repent after sinning – is within their capacity, and should never be seen as impossible.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, suggests a different point of connection between these verses and the preceding section, following the plain meaning of the phrase “*ha-mitzva ha-zot*” (“this commandment”), as referring to the Torah generally. In these verses, Rav Hirsch explains, Moshe establishes that the Torah is accessible and relevant at all times and under all circumstances. “It is not in the heavens” – it does not require any sort of revelation or special divine inspiration that we need to wait for, nor is it “across the sea” – limited to some other region, society or historical period which presented more ideal conditions for fulfilling God’s commands. The Torah is “in your mouth and in your heart” – relevant and applicable right now, today, regardless of where we are, what we are going through, or what challenges we face.

This truth about Torah, Rav Hirsch explains, affirms Moshe’s prediction in the previous section – that despite *Benei Yisrael*’s dispersion throughout the world, they will eventually repent and return to the Land of Israel. Rav Hirsch writes:

In the foregoing…assurance is given that in spite of all the changes of fate it [the Torah] will never be lost to us or we to it, but that ultimately we will return to it, with all our heart and soul. As a reason for this confidence, the real meaning of the contents of the Torah…is pointed out as being so near and so understandable to the human intellect… It contains no secret metaphysical references to anything beyond the grasp of [the] ordinary human mind…to understand and keep it does not assume anything but the ordinary conditions of life of those who are in duty bound to observe it…

That is why, because the subject of this Torah is our own whole life and the means of understanding it lie so near to hand, it will accompany us through all our wanderings through the ages, and after all our going astray and all our trials we shall find our way back again to everlasting faithfulness to it.

The guarantee of our ultimate return to the Torah is our awareness of its applicability under all circumstances, the knowledge that we are bound by its laws and teachings not only under ideal, pristine conditions, but also in times of turmoil and confusion. Once we realize that we are expected to observe the Torah to the best of our ability under whichever circumstances we ever find ourselves, no matter how less-than-ideal those circumstances are, we will never despair, and we will continue growing and improving until we achieve full repentance and become worthy of our nation’s final redemption.

Tuesday

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe expresses his concern to the people that there may be some who will choose to worship other deities instead of serving God. He introduces his concern by noting that *Benei Yisrael* had spent many years in Egypt and then encountered other nations, “and you saw their detestable things and their fetishes, wood and stone, silver and gold which was with them” (29:16). *Benei Yisrael* had observed the pagans’ worship of their gods, and they might thus be tempted to follow their example and embrace their beliefs and practices, rather than standing out by serving the one, true God.

Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, offers an explanation for why Moshe speaks first of “wood and stone,” and then of “silver and gold which was with them.” The inexpensive wood and stone idols were displayed openly, Rashi writes, and so *Benei Yisrael* actually saw these statues. The gold and silver articles, however, were “*imahem*” (“with them”), in the privacy of the pagans’ homes. They were not put on display, as their owners understandably feared that they might then be stolen.

The question naturally arises as to why, according to this reading, Moshe describes *Benei Yisrael* as having seen both the “wood and stone” and the “silver and gold which was with them.” If the silver and gold articles were not made publicly visible, then *Benei Yisrael* did not see them. Why, then, does Moshe express his fear that *Benei Yisrael* would be tempted not only by the “wood and stone,” but also by the “silver and gold” which was concealed from their view?

The answer, perhaps, is that although *Benei Yisrael* did not actually see the silver and gold statues, they were nevertheless aware of them. They were told of how the pagans’ kept extravagant idols hidden and guarded – and this posed just as much as a threat to *Benei Yisrael* as the visible statues did. Just as *Benei Yisrael* may have been tempted by the statues which they actually saw, they may have likely been misled by knowing that the pagans spent large amounts of money on their statues and invested great efforts to protect them. When we see people according great importance to something, investing money and effort on behalf of some objective, this impacts our perception of that item or that pursuit. If we see others regarding something as a matter of great importance, we are prone to similarly regard it as a matter of great importance. And thus Moshe expressed his concern that *Benei Yisrael* might be influenced not only by what they saw – but also by what they specifically did not see, by what they knew was too precious to be displayed.

We influence the people around us not only by what we show, but also by what we hide, by what we cherish, by what we guard and protect. They see and take note of what we value, what we prioritize, and what we deem important. If we live with the correct priorities, regarding as important that which is truly important, this will have an impact, raising the esteem for our dearly-held values in the eyes of the people with whom we come in contact.

Wednesday

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moshe foresees the time when *Benei Yisrael*, after having been banished into exile, will repent, and return to the faithful worship of God, whereupon God would accept their repentance and bring them back to their homeland. Describing the nation’s process of repentance, Moshe says, “You shall return unto the Lord your God and heed His voice…you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul” (30:2).

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his *Oznayim La-Torah* commentary, finds it significant that the Torah emphasizes the repentance of the people as well as their offspring – “*ata u-vanekha*” (“you and your children”). He explains that when a person leads a sinful lifestyle, he bears responsibility not for the wrongful conduct itself, but also for the effect his decisions and behaviors have on his children. They are, of course, impacted by their parents’ conduct, and so their wayward behavior is, to a considerable degree, the fault of the parents. Therefore, the people’s repentance must also include their offspring – an effort to bring their children along on their own journey of repentance. As the people set out to return, they must endeavor to reverse the negative effects of their wrongful conduct by seeking to inspire their children to follow their lead and renew their commitment to God’s laws.

This explanation of the verse reminds us that our behavior – both positive and negative – impacts the people around us, particularly those closest to us. If we act wrongly, we have not only committed a one-time offense – but we have created a ripple effect of sorts, setting a negative example that is likely to influence others. Therefore, our efforts to perform *teshuva*, to grow and improve, must take into account not only our personal advancement, but also the impact of our behavior upon the people around us. We are to focus on improving ourselves not only for our own sake, but also for the purpose of inspiring and influencing others to join us in our lifelong quest for religious greatness.

Thursday

Parashat Vayeilekh opens with Moshe’s final remarks to *Benei Yisrael* before his death, which he introduced by informing them, “I am one hundred and twenty years old today, and can no longer go and come…” (31:2). Rashi, based on the Gemara in Masekhet Sota (13b), explains that Moshe was telling the people, “On this day I was born, and on this day I shall die.” In other words, Moshe died on his birthday, such that he lived precisely one hundred and twenty complete years.

What might be the significance of Moshe’s having passed away on his birthday? Why, according to the Gemara, did Moshe make a point of noting to the people that he was departing this world on the same date on which he had been born?

Rav Menachem Bentzion Sacks, in his *Menachem Tziyon*, explains that when a person repents, he experiences renewal, such that he can truly be said to have been created anew that day. Therefore, if a person strives to grow and improve each day, then he becomes a different creature each day. He is “born,” in a sense, each and every day of his life. The Gemara speaks of Moshe dying on his birthday to indicate that the righteous are “born” each day, as they continually strive to advance, until their dying day, such that even that day is a righteous person’s “birthday” – the day he was created.

The message being conveyed, then, is that each day of life offers us a new opportunity to recreate ourselves. Even in advanced age, and regardless of what how one has conducted himself in the past, he can become a different person by striving to become better than he was the day before. Every day can become our “birthday” if we take advantages of the unique opportunities it presents us to grow and improve, and do what we can to make ourselves better, thereby becoming a new person that was born just today.

Friday

In Parashat Vayeilekh, God informs Moshe that there will come a time when *Benei Yisrael* will worship idols, whereupon He will punish the nation by bringing calamities upon them. In response, *Benei Yisrael* will say, “Is it not because my God is not in my midst that these troubles have befallen me?” (31:17). God warns that at that point, “I shall surely hide My countenance from them because of all the evil they commit…” (31:18).

Many commentators raised the question of why God would become further incensed at the people in response to what appears as a process of repentance. If the people recognize that they had suffered hardship because God had abandoned them on account of their wrongdoing, then why does God respond by continuing to “hide” His “countenance” from them?

Many different interpretations have been offered by the commentators. The Ramban explains this verse to mean that God would “conceal” Himself in the sense of continuing to withhold the final redemption, until the people’s process of repentance is complete. A particularly novel interpretation is advanced by Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, rereading this verse as, “I shall surely turn My countenance away from all the evil they had committed.” According to this reading of the verse, God indeed speaks of His accepting the people’s repentance and forgiving them for their sins.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his *Oznayim La-Torah*, offers a different explanation, noting that the people’s reaction expresses not repentance, but despair. When the people rhetorically ask, “Is it not because my God is not in my midst that these troubles have befallen me?” they are not making the decision to repent. Instead, they are despairing of the possibility of ever receiving God’s assistance again. They have decided that God has permanently breached the covenant with them in response to their breach of the covenant, such that there is no value or purpose in ever returning to His service. God will then continue punishing them to show them that the covenant is still binding, that His love for them is everlasting, and that He still awaits their repentance, regardless of what they have done. The continuing punishments will, ironically, show that He has not despaired, and eagerly anticipates their return.

One of the deterrents to repentance is despair, the mistaken notion that we have strayed too far and sinned too much to earn God’s forgiveness. The peculiar appeal of this reaction to our failures is that it is couched in piety. We feel “righteous” when we view our sins as too numerous or too grave to be forgiven, or to allow for the possibility of restoring our relationship with God. But here in Parashat Vayeilekh, according to this interpretation, God warns us that the greatest sin of all is despairing from repentance, and doubting God’s limitless compassion and unconditional love for His nation. There is nothing “righteous” about feeling that God does not want us to try to improve and return to Him, regardless of what we have done in the past. In these verses in Parashat Vayeilekh, God sharply condemns the people who will assume they cannot return to Him after completely abandoning the Torah and embracing pagan worship. Nothing we have done prevents us from humbly and sincerely repenting and seeking God’s compassion. We are to firmly and confidently believe that under all circumstances, God eagerly anticipates our efforts to grow and is prepared to forgive us if we genuinely seek to improve.

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