

## PARSHAS KI SAVO 5777

In this week's parsha Klal Yisroel are standing at the edge of the border of Eretz Yisroel. It took them forty years to become worthy of this moment. The birth of this nation is different than the birth of every other nation. Most nations start their existence with a specific geographical location. They have a culture which evolves over time. They have blood lines and a common language. But Klal Yisroel's national identity starts with our relationship with Hashem. It is based on a bris.

What is the purpose of keeping all these mitzvos? We have been singled out by Hashem to have this unique duty of putting Hashem up as our model to imitate His middos. What it means to be a Jew on the fundamental level is to perfect our middos. Hashem singled out Avrohom Ovinu because Hashem knew that Avrohom would instill in his family and his followers the middos of Hashem. Without them, our whole relationship with Hashem doesn't get started.

Next, we have to keep the detailed halachos of the Torah. And thirdly, we "have to listen to the voice of Hashem". What does this mean?

In the haftorah to Parshas Zachor we read about Shaul Hamelech's failure to listen to Shmuel Hanovi's instructions to wipe out Amoleik. He tried to excuse his failure by arguing that he brought back animals only for sacrifices to offer to Hashem. Shmuel Hanovi responded: "What does Hashem want more? Hundreds of animal sacrifices or to listen to His word?" Hashem wants our korbonos only as an expression of fulfilling His will. He only wants our mitzvos as a way of our fulfilling the will of Hashem.

The Ramban asks why a person who is obligated in a mitzvah gets more reward than someone who does the same mitzvah out of his own voluntary choice? He answers that every mitzvah has two aspects. One aspect is the inherent spiritual power invested in every mitzvah to positively affect and uplift the neshomo of the person who does it. This effect is there regardless whether it is commanded or not. But there is a second aspect that only exists when a person is commanded - fulfilling the will of Hashem out of a sense of submission and surrender to Hashem's authority over me. I have no independent will. So even though these people are performing the same mitzvah, there is an extra level of avodas Hashem when you are responding and submitting to His command.

### Three Aspects of Avodas Hashem

There is an interesting sequence that is being described in the parsha (see Devarim 26:17). First, middos development, then performance of mitzvos, and then submission to the will of Hashem. It is a tremendous avodoh. Every one of us is born with many different tendencies. Some people are more friendly, others more recluse. Some are more excitable, violent, and others are more reserved and calm.

As we grow and mature, we can start looking at ourselves more

objectively and figure out who we are now and who we want to be. Some people give up on the prospect of self-determination and claim, "well this is just who I am, this is the real me and I don't want to be fake." The answer is there is no "real me". There is the person that you are currently, and the person you are in potential and Hashem wants you to become. You have to take the personality and the tendencies and the various yetzorum you have, and submit them all to serve Hashem. It's not always easy and it doesn't just happen by itself. It needs effort and training, and discipline.

In the morning brochos, we daven that we should become comfortable and natural with doing mitvos. Imagine someone who is trying to become frum and has to suddenly confront a world of restrictions and prohibitions at every turn. Shabbos, kashrus, brochos; everything he casually does throughout his normal daily routine, he suddenly realizes could be right or wrong. There is an incredible burden of discipline and is thrown upon him. We daven that we be naturally connected to this lifestyle of Torah and mitzvos.

We also daven to not be confronted by a nisoyon, to avoid challenges when we are weak. If we stumble, it is shameful. We daven not to come to shame. If we stumble multiple times, we discover that we have lost control over our lives and that the yetzer hora has taken over, heading us on a path of self-destruction. We daven not to be controlled by our yetzer hora.

But we don't stop there. We don't just want to get close to the yetzer tov, we don't just want the yetzer tov to be an integral part of our being. We want both our yetzorum to submit to Hashem's will. Even when we do mitzvos, we want to do them not based on how we feel or how we understand, but as a submission to the will of Hashem. This is what Shmuel told Shaul Hamelech. Korbonos are nice, but the essence is to submit your will to His will.

The posuk talks about middos tovos first. But that doesn't mean it's the easiest. The Vilna Goan was reported to have said that if he managed to break one bad middoh and turn it into a middoh tovah, that enough would make his life worthwhile.

Then we have to take our dikduk be'mitzvos as an exercise in submitting our will to Hashem's will. Every mitzvah is a derech avodoh to overcome our natural attitudes and tendencies. We have many interesting insights and ideas about the mitzvos, but our ideas don't run the world. I confront a gemara, a Shulchan Aruch, a posuk in Tanach, and although I think it should be one way, I submit to Hashem's infinite wisdom.

Once we get comfortable with Torah and mitzvos and self-discipline becomes a way of life, then we train ourselves to listen to Hashem's voice and not our own voice. But first we need middos tovos and perform what Hashem expects of you.

Hashem has separated us in these three ways, and we have

become the Am Seguloh as a result of mastering these three steps. We rise above all other nations because we are fulfilling Hashem's purpose for creation. We aren't automatically a superior nation. We have that potential that needs actualization by our efforts in achieving these three aspects of avodas Hashem. By being a superior nation, we become an Am Kodosh.

### **Becoming an Am Kodosh**

An Am Kodosh is a transformation of a human being and shaping himself. Looking at the middos and mitzvos in the way Hashem wants us to develop. Looking at a blatt gemara and trying to figure out how Hashem wants the world to run and not be enamored by my own ideas. We can be highly motivated and inspired to do the right thing, but there has to be submission to the will of Hashem.

Take the potential that lies in the neshomo of each Jew—it is incredible—to rise above all the nations and become an Am Kodosh—to have spiritual values and goals. No other nation has such an intense focus on ruchniyus.

In the midbor we were relieved of all physical needs because everything was taken care of through miracles. But now, as we enter Eretz Yisroel, the artificial life is ending and real life begins. And we still have to keep that focus on ruchniyus despite the distractions of dealing with our physical needs. Each one is going into whatever profession he goes into, but he has to remain focused on his ruchniyus goals.

Then there is an amazing part of the parsha: brochos and kolos.

The Torah is not just an uplifting lifestyle of spirituality - inspiring and fulfilling our deepest needs of the neshomo. It is not just a good idea. A Jew doesn't have a choice. There is potential in each and every one of us. But we don't have the option to waste it. We have to develop it. If you realize that potential, there are amazing benefits and advantages that will result. If we fail to develop it and we just want to be like every other nation, then there are also incredible consequences, but in the other direction.

That special neshomo with that potential to develop into a superior nation is a gift demands of us that we realize that potential. There is no opting out of the mission. We ask Hashem for siyyatoh de'shmayoh, but there has to be the decision to want to grow and to develop.

Rabbeinu Yona says an amazing thing. He says free-will is not a given, it's not automatic. Otherwise it wouldn't be a mitzvah. A person has to take himself in hand and decide that he is going to choose the proper course of action and the proper way of life. If he just goes with the flow and follows the tide which leads him to a lifestyle of Torah and mitzvos, he is not exercising his bechiroh. He is just reacting to pressures and influences—internal and external. Bechiroh is a mitzvas asei to take your life in your hands and submit it to rotzon Hashem.

Every human being is made with the tzelem Elokim and has the potential of free will. A Jew is given an extra potential. But it has to be made real through your free will to make yourself and mold yourself into the Am Kodosh that you are destined to be.

### **Shining Forth to the World**

This is an issue of our national identity. We can, as a nation, rise above all other nations and we will not be subjugated by them. Not only as individuals.

And this goes hand-in-hand with Hashem's response of special hashgocho profis. The whole world will recognize our superiority in living a higher, more ruchniyus existence because we follow the Torah and develop our middos and subjugate our will to Hashem's will. And they will be in awe of us. It is the ultimate Kiddush Hashem. We don't have to proselytize to convert the entire world to Judaism. We are obligated to shine forth to the world as an example of what a life of Torah and mitzvos is capable of producing. This transformation has a spill-over effect to the outside.

But if we are no different than anyone else and we sink to the levels of the general non-Jewish world, and we become known for committing crimes and violating basic moral standards of honesty and integrity, then we are doing great harm to our mission of projecting the greatness of the Torah to the outside world.

A Jew has three levels obligations: To build-up his own neshomo, to enhance the overall level of Klal Yisroel, and to show the world what the superiority of the Torah is when it is fulfilled properly. People will complain that they aren't at that level and it cannot be expected of them. But as we said, each of us has the potential, the free will to make ourselves into that role-model of middos tovos and submission to the will of Hashem. The fact that Hashem chose us for this mission, and separated us, a small group of people from all other nations to fulfill this task, means that we have that ability to succeed in this demand. It is not an option. He expects that potential to be realized.

It is a heavy burden; the consequences are unbelievable.

### **Strengthening Torah Observance**

The klollos conclude with the curse upon one who does not "hold up" the Torah. "What does this mean?" asks the Yerushalmi. That the Torah is "falling"? It refers to the person who does hagboh. He makes the entire tzibbur give testimony affirming the truth of the Torah. The Ramban explains that this is an obligation upon every one of us to make the Torah strong and make sure that others are keeping the Torah. King Yoshiyahu read this posuk and realized that because he has the capacity to enforce public observance of the Torah, he is absolutely obligated to do so. And he started a teshuvah campaign that swept through Klal Yisroel.

We have to make sure the glory of the Torah shines forth and shows how keeping the Torah properly produces a superior human being and a superior nation.

But more than that, we have to make the Torah strong. We have to make sure that not only the people in this room or this building keep the Torah, but that all of Klal Yisroel keep the Torah - each one in his own way, according to his abilities and talents. But we have that responsibility.

The Bris with Hashem is a heavy obligation on everyone. We need to remind ourselves of the brochos and kolos before Rosh Hashono, as the the gemara in Megilloh says. There are many reasons for this. One reason is, as we head for the Yom Hadin, we need to realize that Torah isn't just an idea or even a great idea. It makes us who we are, it makes us fundamentally different. It demands of us that we live a superior life. Facing the Yom Hadin means measuring ourselves up to the absolute demand that Hashem placed upon us. This is part of our preparation in Elul. Understanding our potential, understanding the various levels we can actualize through Torah, and understanding the absolute nature of the demand to realize our potential.

It is hard, but the reward is unbelievable. We become the nation of Hashem, representing Him in this world and rising above all other nations.

I saw a very interesting interview between the Secretary of Defense of the U.S. with the media. He was asked why he accepted the job when it was clear to him that he and the President had sharp differences of opinions. He answered that he was raised with an attitude that one is here to serve. If the head asks you to serve the country, then that's what you do whether you agree with the head of the country or not. For this government official, the head is the president of the United States and you don't refuse his call to serve. For us, the head is the Melech Malchei Hamelochim. He demands of us that we serve. When He demands, we certainly don't have the option to refuse. Every soldier and every government official knows

he has to serve his country and obey his superior. We know we are in a different army and we serve Hashem. He separated us and gave us a specific potential and he made a demand to realize that potential and become the Am Kodosh.

It is not an option. It is an absolute demand of Hashem. In exchange, we achieve unbelievable levels.

When we approach the Yomim Noroim, we examine ourselves. But we don't just focus on the past mistakes and failures. We take time to appreciate the inherent potential greatness we possess and ask ourselves how much we fulfilled our incredible potential for growth that we have been given, and what is our plan to fulfill more of that potential that we are demanded to fulfill in an absolute way, going into the year ahead.