

## PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYELECH 5777

Each year we read Nitzvoim-Vayelech before Rosh Hashannah.

Rishonim discuss why at this point in the Chumash there is a new bris in Arvos Moav. They are about to enter Eretz Yisroel—a new life with new challenges. Until now they didn't have to worry about food or water, their clothes grew with them, they didn't have to worry about weather and the elements. But now, they are going to have to worry about all these things. It is a new life and it requires a new bris. It goes together with some horrible, harrowing brochos and klollos.

Rabbeinu Bachaye—a talmid of the Rashba—writes an explanation of a passage in Mishlei as his introduction to this parsha. The posuk says "Open tochochoh is better than hidden love." Shlomo Hamelech teaches us important principles about tochocho.

Rabbeinu Bachaye explains that living with tochocho is absolutely essential. Life without tochocho is really death. Hashem is showing His love for Klal Yisroel in multiple ways. He chose Klal Yisroel as His people and this means He demands something extra from them. He cares about our success and therefore He punishes us and chastises us as a parent loves and chastises a child. A parent isn't showing any love when he lets his child run amok without any boundaries and guidance. Just the opposite, he is abandoning the child and is showing he doesn't care about the child's welfare. A loving parent teaches his child right from wrong and demands—sometimes forcefully—that we adhere to these truths for our own benefit. Hashem acts exactly the same way.

Hashem chose Avrohom Ovinu because he knew that Avrohom was able to pass the message on to subsequent generations and build a nation of people dedicated to his ideals. Iyov was a tzaddik—a tremendous tzaddik—but he wasn't able to pass his legacy on to his children. Daily he tried to atone for all the sins they were committing at their wild parties, rather than inspiring them to leave the party life. Avrohom Ovinu could father a nation to pass it on. But this mesorah happens by expecting of the child, and demanding of the child lovingly, gently, but forcefully. A parent loves his child by taking great care and effort to make sure the child ends up in the right way.

So too, Hashem made a bris with Klal Yisroel because He expected that they would fulfill it. At the end of Parshas Vayelech, we are instructed to write a Sefer Torah—every Jew. But it is put in terms of writing the Shiroh. Some meforshim say this term is going on Parshas Ha'azinu. But Torah Sheba'al Peh tells us that the entire Torah is being referred to as a shiroh. It is going to be a testimony to all the brochos and klollos we have committed ourselves to for all time. It will never be forgotten for all of history. It is an incredible promise and prediction.

Young people have difficulty connecting deeply to the state of affairs of Jewish society of 80 years ago. At that time, whether it was in Europe, America, or Eretz Yisroel, the Torah was in a

state of collapse. People were abandoning Torah in droves. The tide towards assimilation was overwhelming. People were wondering if there was going to be a future for Torah in the modern world. Rav Shurkin once showed me a sefer written by a mashgiach of one of the yeshivos in Europe. It was written in the 30's writing about his concern that in 20 years there may be no more bochorim around to teach anymore. It was a frightful time. When I was growing up after the Second World War, I understood that people dedicating their lives to teaching and learning Torah were yechidei seguloh—few and far-between.

What motivated these people to persevere and keep Yiddishkeit alive despite the bleak outlook? They saw the spiritual destruction in Europe and America but always remembered the posuk promising us that the Torah will never be forgotten.

There are two ways to look at a churbon. You can see it as abandonment and a sign of being forsaken. But the Torah itself predicted these churbonos. It is a part of the promise of how the Torah will never be forgotten. It is a gesture of love, because this is how Hashem gets Klal Yisroel back on track. Who is able to be marbitz Torah? It is those who are able to raise a family and raise talmidim and ensure that they love Torah because they see it as a shiroh—not as a burden. Torah is a song of the neshomo longing to get close to Hashem.

Approaching Yomim Noroim we say Selichos. The source for saying selichos before dawn is from the posuk kumi roni ba'layloh. But Chazal have a different pshat as well. Rinoh is not only tefilah, it is also learning Torah at night. The Shechinoh is before you. We are talking about a person who is pouring his neshomo into Torah. So the learning of Torah is a shiroh.

So what changed the Jewish world over those few years to what we see today? This is the promise of the Torah being fulfilled. The deeper a person understands something in Torah, the deeper his neshomo is connecting to the neshomo of Torah. The more Torah becomes a shiroh—a symphony. There is a guarantee that the Torah will always persevere—after all the churbonos that overcome us, there is a small group of people for which Torah is always a shiroh and their neshomos are connected to Hashem through the Torah. Such people can always build up Torah again no matter what happens.

Rav Yochanon Ben Zakkai was struggling with a group of nationalistic Jews who didn't understand Torah. They were more interested in standing up to the Roman invaders and didn't care for Rav Yochanon ben Zakkai's priorities. Because of their stubbornness, the Romans weren't satisfied until the Beis Hamikdosh was destroyed. Rav Yochanon ben Zakkai felt he had no choice but to negotiate with General Vespasian himself. He secured a guarantee that Yavneh and its chachomim would be spared. Even in the midst of a terrible war and drawn-out siege, with churbon at the doorstep, the head of the Sanhedrin is worrying about the future of Torah because he is worrying

about the future of Klal Yisroel. This is the only way we rebuild Klal Yisroel from the ashes.

When all 24,000 talmidim of Rabbi Akivah were wiped out and the world became desolate, after the flourishing of Torah Sheba'al peh all over the country-- how did Rabbi Akivah rebuild? He went to gather a handful of talmidim and, through teaching them, was able to start all over again. Hashem builds through Torah.

After WWII there was a churbon on many levels--both spiritual and physical. But there were special individuals for whom the Torah was a shiroh and the Torah promised that there will always be such a group of people. They are talmidei chachomim who can rebuild by connecting their talmidim's neshomo to the neshomo of the Torah. Hashem says every Jew has an obligation to write a Torah --but not only technically to write a sefer Torah. The Torah isn't just a piece of parchment with some ancient lettering in it. Hashem is telling us to write the Torah in a way that it becomes a shiroh. It takes work. When you first sit down to learn gemara --all day--and you never did it before--it is an overwhelming task. But Meseches Tomid tells us that if you put yourself into it and pour your heart into it, you connect yourself to Hashem through learning Torah.

After the Second World War, different people had different ways of re-building Klal Yisroel. But there is only one way that lasts. The parsha tells us that when Klal Yisroel sink to dangerously low levels, He sends churbon as something dramatic to shake up Klal Yisroel and put them back on track. Hashem says haster astir ponai mayhem. The Ba'al Shem Tov has a beautiful pshat in this phrase. There is regular hester ponim where you see Hashem is hiding, but you can feel that deep down Hashem is pulling the strings behind the scenes to ensure a certain outcome. Haster astir means sometimes the darkness is so deep that you can't even conceive how it can be that what is happening can lead to anything good. The darkest of times.

But Hashem tells us we can survive these dark times because there will always be Torah and it will always be a shiroh. This is the history of Klal Yisroel.

At the end of the era of the Geonim in Bavel, Torah was about to end in Bavel. Hashem arranged that four talmidei chachomim were captured by pirates and were ransomed by various communities outside Bavel. Right before the churbon in Bavel closed down the yeshivos, the seeds were planted for Torah to flourish in Europe and North Africa for the next thousand years. Hashem ensures that Torah is preserved and Klal Yisroel rise up again.

We live in difficult times with unique nisyonos. People who understand our times realize that we are in a bad state - one of the most difficult times since after WWII--even with all the flourishing of yeshivos and yiddishkeit all over the world.

We say in Shemoneh Esrei, there are three steps to teshuvoh. Connect us to Torah and avodoh, and then we get to teshuvoh. If a person wants to connect himself to Hashem, he does it primarily through Torah. This leads to tefillah and it ends with teshuvoh. Somehow, Hashem implanted in the Torah all the keys to growing in ruchniyus in all aspects. Your davening gets better, you want to do teshuvoh sheleimoh, and we ask first to get reconnected to the Torah.

Approaching the Yomim Noroim and reading the tochocho, we are saddened and disheartened because we don't see the love in the tochocho. We don't see that Hashem told us everything that was going to happen in advance. We

shouldn't be surprised, we shouldn't be shocked. We should appreciate that Hashem knows this is what we need in order to get ourselves back to the level we are expected to rise to. Don't wake up and ask "what's happening?" But don't give up. As bleak as times may be, Torah is forever. Torah is a shiroh, but it takes effort to build ourselves up to that level where Torah is such a part of our being that the neshomo sings out to Hashem with his learning. Part of becoming a Ben Torah is putting in the work to make sure you eventually get there.

As we get closer to the time of Selichos and we start building ourselves to stand in front of Hashem. We think about how we can survive through the most difficult times of Jewish history and we read about how the Torah needs to be a shiroh. Pour your heart into it and you suddenly find yourself connecting your neshomo to Hashem, and Torah becomes an integral part of your life.