

PARSHAS KI SAVO

תשע"ח

The week before Rosh Hashono we always read Parshas Nitzovim. The gemara in Megilloh says the week before Rosh Hashono we read the brochos and klollos of Mishna Torah. There is a difference of opinion whether this refers to Parshas Ki Savo or Nitzovim. We read both of them right before Rosh Hashono.

Approaching the Yom Hadin requires us to take stock of whom we are and where we are holding. The judgment of Hashem is like a deep abyss. We need to understand the consequences of our actions and our attitudes.

But, the parsha of tochocho in Ki Savo has a few seemingly unrelated parshiyos before it. We have the parsha of Bikkurim which is familiar to us from the Pesach Haggadah. It tells us about hakoras hatov. It tells us that we didn't receive Eretz Yisroel ourselves and don't reap the produce of the land based on our own efforts. History didn't start with me. We exist within a context. We are the result of a long chain of 3000-4000 year history. We have to ask ourselves how we got where we are. How did we get this land and these first crops?

The answer is that we are here because there were Ovovs and Shevatim. Yaakov Ovinu left Aram to escape Lovon and then came to Egypt to escape the famine. We are the next link in a long chain. We didn't just appear yesterday out of nothing. Hashem gave us this land as part of a deep plan for humanity which He has been guiding and helping along. I am part of Klal Yisroel.

Additionally, there is vidui maaser where each individual testifies to his own individual fulfillment of the will of Hashem. I did all Hashem asked of me and this is why I am asking for prosperity. I would not deserve it if I didn't fulfill my personal obligations. I am a result of a long process of history but I am also responsible for my individual actions.

Then we have one important section of four pesukim before the tochocho begins. They define the entire parsha. Hashem tells us to treat the Torah everyday as if we received it today. Even though it was given over 3500 years ago, we say every day in shacharis after kriyas shema that these words are true and eternal and straight and beloved to us and our children and our generation and to all our descendants, to all of Klal Yisroel for all time. If it was true 3500 years ago, it is true today.

The Torah uses the term he'emartoh. Rashi explains it to mean that Hashem designated us to be special and different. He will be our God. Although Hashem rules over the whole world, He made a bris with us and has a special relationship with us. He is accessible to us in a way that He is not accessible to anyone else. The Torah then gives to us ways that we have an ability to relate individually to Hashem.

The first is veholachtoh bedrochov. We have a mitzvah of walking in Hashem's ways. The Rambam explains that Hashem chose Avrohom Ovinu to found the nation of Klal Yisroel because He knew Avrohom would train his descendants in the ways of Hashem. This refers to middos tovos.

Pirkei DeRebbi Eliezer explains that middos tovos are a prerequisite to everything in Torah. Our connection with Hashem obligates us to imitate all of His middos. We cannot have any connection to the Torah without middos tovos.

The Rambam says that if a person only does mitzvos, he will not get a reward in olam habboh. One needs the merit of the mitzvah of learning Torah in order to get the ultimate reward of olam habboh.

This is an explicit gemara in Sotah and Brachos. The gemara explains the posuk where a mitzvah is compared to a candle and Torah to light. A mitzvah is a limited light like a candle. Torah is the overwhelming light that illuminates the world. Women who are not obligated to learn Torah earn this reward by facilitating the Torah learning of others. They must ensure that their male family members are sufficiently dedicated to learning.

The Rambam in Hilchos Teshuvah adds that the prerequisite to everything is middos tovos. They are a prerequisite to the reward of learning Torah. This is why one will lose his olam habboh for committing aveiros which betray a serious lack of middos—humiliating others publicly, and enjoying other's downfall, etc. It's not that the individual aveiroh is so severe. It is that if your neshomo is so coarse and insensitive and doesn't achieve a basic level of refinement and human decency in this world, it just doesn't belong in the lofty realm of olam habboh.

So the baseline of a Jew is middos tovos through holachtoh bedrochov. Then the posuk continues with a very unique description of shemiras mitzvos. The Netziv explains that this does not refer to the actual performance but rather to all aspects of learning Torah. This posuk describes how we relate to Hashem in our unique manner. Through the learning of Torah, we relate to Hashem in this world and elevate our neshomos to achieve the highest level of closeness to Hashem in olam habboh.

There is a seeming contradiction in the posuk in Parshas Yisro that describes the bris between Hashem and the Jewish People at Har Sinai. It says we are Hashem's unique treasure because the world is Hashem's. How does that make any sense? It means that even though Hashem created the entire cosmos and runs the entire cosmos in a hands on manner still Hashem made a bris with us and chose us out of all the nations on Earth. The Jewish People is the treasure house where Hashem stored all His special attributes.

As a result of our acceptance of all this, we connect to Hashem in a unique way and will become morally and spiritually superior to all other nations. It doesn't come automatically. It happens only when we focus on Hashem as being the source of all value and the center of our lives. In Parshas Voeschanon we read that keeping the Torah elevates our stature in the eyes of the entire world. When they see us acting in the way the Torah demands of us, they will revere us and respect our way of life.

What makes a human being superior? It is not by developing the body and the material world. It is not because of Nobel prizes and high tech industries. It is by focusing on the spiritual heritage of Klal Yisroel. It is about being holy and pure. It is not enough to ignore the mitzvos and just keep the ethical parts of the Torah as Reform Judaism did 100 years ago. There is a dimension called kedushoh which Reform Judaism didn't value. They tried to gain acceptance and admiration of the world by their ethical teachings but forgot that kedushoh and an elevated lifestyle of spirituality is the key to our superiority.

We keep Torah and mitzvos including kashrus because it brings kedushoh into our lives. It is all a means to connecting to Hashem in the highest way. There is a bris and there are consequences of not keeping the bris. The world will be impressed by us only because we are different and kadosh.

There are unbelievable brochos and unbelievable klollos. The potential

for greatness means there is an inverse potential to become corrupt and degenerate to a level below anything else. The plant is the lowest level of life. When it dies, it cannot produce tumoh. An animal is on a higher level so when certain animals die, they produce tumas sheretz or tumas neveiloh. When a human being dies he produces a stronger level of tumoh. Only a Jew can become tomay. A Jew has so much potential for kedushoh and taharoh that even while he is alive he can produce tumoh and become tomay.

The greater the potential for elevation means there is a greater potential for descending to the very bottom. The bris means we have a tremendous opportunity for growth and we have to know there are grave consequences for not taking advantage of those opportunities for elevation.

Hashem gave incredible kochos hanefesh to connect to Him and we have tremendous potential. The first step to actualizing that potential is middos tovos. There is a message to sefiroh that most people completely miss. We mourn the death of the talmidim of Rebbi Akiva. Chazal don't refer to them as 24,000 talmidim. They are referred to as 12,000 pairs of chavrusos. They didn't treat each other

with respect. Because of that, they all died out and it was a total devastation. The destruction of the Beis Hamikdosh was followed by a tremendous revival of Jewish life and flowering of limud haTorah with Rebbi Akiva. But Hashem decided to wipe it all away and start over again because if the Torah you learn doesn't have middos tovos along with it, then He is simply not interested in it.

This is a powerful message that everyone should remember when they are complaining about chavrusos and criticizing fellow talmidim.

So the first level of connection is by going in Hashem's ways and then limud HaTorah. Hashem tells us that we can be an Am Seguloh to be treated differently than everyone else when we keep the mitzvos and understand that their purpose is to uplift us and elevate us to live on a higher level of kedushoh and taharoh.

The goal of Torah and mitzvos is to uplift our lives and become a spiritual nation. We have unique neshomos with a unique potential and we read the brochos and klollos of the bris before Rosh Hashono to remind us of the grave consequences of not living up to our unique potential.