

PARSHAS KI SAVO

תשע"ט

Parshas Ki Savo, Nitzovim and Vayelech are all read before Rosh Hashono. We are supposed to take the yom hadin very seriously. The Torah is not just a collection of good ideas and suggestions. We need to understand that we made a bris with Hashem. We were chosen to be Hashem's people to carry out His purpose for creation. This comes with brochos and klolos. We were given the spiritual capacity to become a superior nation. But, this means we have to have the consequences—either positive or negative—of our success or failure in that mission.

We are about to have a din about how well we are living up to the bris. All the other nations of the world have their judgment in general terms for maintaining society with their seven mitzvos that are incumbent on bnei Noach. We are being called in separately to reckon for our advantages and our privileges. Did we use them in the way they were intended or did we squander them? There are serious consequences for not maximizing the opportunities we have been given.

We are heading towards the yom hadin. When someone has a court case where his life hangs in the balance, he will certainly spend time getting ready in advance. The shofar is our wake-up call to get ready for our court case on Rosh Hashono. One needs to have bitachon that Hashem is running the world, and that it is being decided in shomayim if there will be war in the Middle East in the near or far future. The decision is made based on Klal Yisroel's balance of mitzvos and aveiros. If we take to heart the tefilos in the Rosh Hashono davening which say clearly that war and destruction or peace and tranquility are being decided in these days in shomayim, it should change our perception of current events. We see the rapid increase of tensions here over the past days and weeks and we should realize that Hashem is pulling all the strings. The leaders of the United States, Russia, Iran, etc., are simply following the script that Hashem is writing for them. It has nothing to do with them. They are tools.

Shlomo Lorincz wrote a book of memoirs recording the hadracha he took from true gedolei Yisroel while serving in the Knesset. He writes about an interview of David Ben-Gurion—the first prime minister of Israel—where Lorincz asked Ben Gurion to look back at his long distinguished career and think if he had any regrets. He revealed that there was one big mistake which he made, and he couldn't understand how he had made it. It was the mistake of granting exemptions to yeshiva bochurim from the mandatory army draft. He didn't fathom how he could have made so obvious an error in judgment. Another time he interviewed Moshe Dayan and got the same answer—the one big blunder of his political career was exempting yeshiva bochurim from conscription.

The explanation is simple. Hashem put various individuals in positions of power and influence in order to use them towards fulfilling Hashem's plan for history. The people themselves don't realize they are simply pawns and puppets in carrying out these plans. They act in irrational and unpredictable ways at times. So the people involved in deciding about war in the region aren't really deciding anything. Our role as bnei Torah is to get as many zechuyos as we possibly can to lift the level of Klal Yisroel to protect us from any negative fallout from these conflicts.

The posuk says, "Today Hashem is commanding chukim and mishpotim to be fulfilled with all our hearts and souls." Rashi explains the first word—"today". We have to work to maintain the freshness of receiving Torah at Har Sinai as if it was given today.

Hashem has distinguished us to follow in His ways—to have superior middos.

Hashem spoke to Avroho Ovinu in Parshas Vayeiroh—as described by the Rambam in the first perek of Hilchos Deos. He told Avrohom that he is being chosen because he is able to effectively pass along the derech of Hashem to his offspring. This refers to middos tovos.

On Har Sinai after the cheit hoegel, Moshe Rabbeinu asks Hashem to find favor and give him understanding of the middos of Hashem. Hashem responds by teaching Moshe Rabbeinu the 13 middos of rachamim. Moshe then asks to understand the way Hashem rewards and punishes, but Hashem refused. There are certain things that man cannot know in this world. We can know the middos of Hashem that He expects us to follow, to integrate them into our personality and come close to Hashem. This is how we find favor in His eyes. Middos are the foundation of everything. A Jew is different because he has integrated the middos of Hashem into his being and functions differently in the world.

Then he needs to keep taryag mitzvos. But there is something deeper. The Ramban in Kiddushin asks a simple question. Why does a person who is commanded to obey get more reward than someone who does mitzvos voluntarily? Shouldn't it be the reverse? He answers that there are two aspects to mitzvos. One is the inherent ruchniyus that each mitzvah contains. Doing mitzvos creates a positive effect on the person who does it whether he is commanded or not. But then there is the dimension of fulfilling the will of Hashem—showing subservience to Hashem's authority. Accepting malchus shomayim is another dimension which is the extra aspect of one who is commanded. My ideas and my preferences do not run the world. My wants and desires are subject to Hashem's rules and commands.

Se we are singled out by Hashem, the One who created everything in the universe—from the immense galaxies to the smallest sub-atomic particle. He chose us to forge a special personal relationship with Him. But everything has its consequences. Being Hashem's people means we are subject to close scrutiny—but we are protected and guaranteed to survive throughout history. There have been many attempts by historians and philosophers to analyze world events and try to explain Jewish survival. But we defy explanation. No other nation in the history of the world has undergone so many persecutions, dispersals, exiles, and near extinctions—and always somehow come back. We are always reborn. The fact that we are sitting here in Eretz Yisroel, 3500 years after Hashem promised this land to us makes no sense—there is no rational explanation other than to realize that Hashem runs history and He is fulfilling His promises.

But nothing happens automatically—we still have to do our part. We have a unique task of fulfilling taryag mitzvos which no other nation is charged with. The Torah uplifts us and ennobles us in the process and we become a morally and spiritually superior nation. We are an am kodosh.

Our national identity is based on the fact that we have a different role to play in this world. Our job is to present the world with the reality that there is a spiritual component to our existence. We are dedicated to spiritual goals and connecting to Hashem—and not material existence. We are kedoshim. But it isn't easy to go against the tide and stand out among the nations. Many Jews living today resist this calling to be kedoshim. But if we were just like every other nation, we

wouldn't be here today. We would have disappeared long ago just like the seven nations who occupied Eretz Yisroel and were wiped out. We are here and we are protected from extinction in order to show the rest of the world that ruchniyus is a real part of the world and not just some abstract concept. We exist today in order to live lives of kedushoh with spiritual goals.

If we do our part, we will become that am kodosh.

There are many reasons why we read these parshiyos before Rosh Hashono. We need to make a broader cheshbon hanefesh and see the forest and not get lost among the trees and the twigs and the leaves. The right cheshbon hanefesh to do before the yom hadin is to ask ourselves how well are we doing in this greater task of living that special life—which shows there is ruchniyus in the world. How well am I broadcasting Hashem's message and inspiring those around me to admire Klal Yisroel's connection to Hashem? This is an uphill battle today because it is so materialistic—ruchniyus is not real to us.

The main complaint against chareidi society living in Israel today is that we are a drain on the economy. We aren't economically productive enough to sustain ourselves and we are a burden on the broader society. So there is an attempt to change chareidi culture and make us productive members of the workforce. That is one view. Another view is that a human being is simply a physical creature and should only spend his time and energy pursuing the satisfaction of his physical wants and needs. Our tzibbur doesn't share this perspective and must be "educated". But the truth is just the opposite. If secular society would succeed in making everyone pursue material goals instead of spiritual ones, and live their lives like animals, we would lose our right

to exist—especially in Eretz Yisroel. We would have no purpose for our existence anymore. We didn't survive 3500 years and endure untold suffering and persecution just to be the biggest tech giant and start-up nation.

We need to be an am kodosh—to justify our existence. This is the cheshbon hanefesh that we need to make—to what degree are we fulfilling the national mission of which we are a part. The most unimaginable series of events have brought us to where we are today—it is a clear display of Hashem's hashgocho over us. But this is because we have a job to do. Approaching the yom hadin means taking this job very seriously.

This year we have many days of selichos which disrupt our daily schedule. We have to look at who we are and what we stand for. We are fighting against a culture that is very keen on turning everyone into economic machines whose sole purpose on this earth is to produce and consume. Tragically, many of us in the frum community have already been turned. We have to pull ourselves out and ask ourselves how are we fulfilling our unique purpose.

How am I really different than the non-Jewish person who lives next to me in my country of origin? It is not an easy question to answer when you can do virtually everything your non-Jewish neighbor is doing with some kind of hechsher. You just have to follow some technical halachic rules and you are home-free. At the end of the day, am I fundamentally different? Are my life goals different? Is my self-image and identity different?

These are the questions we need to ask ourselves before Rosh Hashono.