

PARSHAS NITZAVIM

תשע"ט

The parsha begins with the krisas bris. It is a very interesting krisas bris because it not only is made with the Jews who are present in Arvos Moav. It is being made with all of Klal Yisroel throughout Jewish history. Klal Yisroel through the generations forms a single organic unit. The gemoroh in Shevuos and Nedarim says that every Jew living today is looked at by the halacha as having personally made a shevuoh at Har Sinai to keep all the mitzvos. Even though maamad Har Sinai took place 3,400 years ago, my neshomo was there and all of us are bound together by that bris. The posuk says the bris is not bound by time and place. When a Jew is born, or when he becomes a ger, he enters into that bris by virtue of being a member of the Jewish people.

At the beginning of Parshas Ki Savo, we read about two mitzvos to make proclamations. The mitzvah of bikkurim and vidui maaser. We are all familiar with the statement when one brings bikkurim because these are the pesukim we recite from the haggodoh on Seder night. One should think about why these pesukim about the history of the geuloh are appropriate when bringing bikkurim.

When a person has a farm or an orchard, and he has spent many months preparing for a harvest for produce, he takes his first fruit and brings it to the Beis Hamikdosh. He makes an important statement about who he is and where he came from. He is not just an individual with a piece of land. He is here in the Beis Hamikdosh because he is part of a greater entity called Klal Yisroel, with roots going all the way to the Ovos. He sees himself as a continuation of his family and his nation's history. He is doing this mitzvah recognizing that he is merely the newest link in the chain of generations—they came from Egypt and settled Eretz Yisroel.

This is an important perspective that we need to have towards mitzvos—to see the things we do day-in day-out, year-in year-out as linking ourselves to an unbreakable chain connecting us to our ancestors and our national experiences. We read these same pesukim at the Seder to drive home the message that all Klal Yisroel left Egypt this night. And if I am a member of Klal Yisroel, that means I personally left Egypt along with them on this night. I am not just a descendant of those Jews who lived at that time of Yetzias Mitzrayim. I personally went through the experience because I myself am part of the nation.

We are an organic unit and each Jew is responsible for every part of the unit to see to it—to the extent that they can—that the bris is kept. We are judged not only for our individual actions in the moment, but for all the future consequences of that action that create a ripple effect throughout time. The judgment on Rosh Hashono is not only for what people living today did in the past year. It is also a judgment on all the actions of the past—by those living and not—which are still affecting people today.

In the coming Yom Kippur, I will be saying Yizkor for my parents because they are also being judged at this time. What did they do this year? They had children who they raised and influenced a certain way which affects how they are functioning in the world today. They are being judged on Yom Kippur for that influence—be it a positive one or a negative one. They had an impact on all kinds of people throughout their lives that is still felt by people—or their descendants—living today. These are the consequences of their actions. One is judged for all one's actions and their consequences for all time. It is all interconnected within one organic unit.

The posuk describing the bris mentions the idea that there can be a root of evil that may not be manifested right away. It is a small root that over time grows and festers until it comes to the surface generations later. The people who planted that small root of evil will be judged for that.

A person might tell himself that he doesn't have to worry about such subtle, nearly invisible actions whose effects many not be apparent for years to come. This is not true. Hashem will not overlook anything. All of man's actions with all of its consequences come before Hashem to be judged.

But more than that. The pesukim say every one of us has to confront Jewish history and learn the lessons of Jewish history. We have to be inquisitive: what did previous generations do or not do, to receive the blessings or the curses that they experienced? How do we replicate their successes and avoid repeating their mistakes?

Every time I drive through some of the desolate places in Eretz Yisroel—to the east towards Yam Hamelach and to the south to the Aravah, I contemplate these pesukim. The Torah tells us that these places used to be fertile and productive and because of aveiros, were decimated for thousands of years afterwards. What did they do wrong to cause such destruction? We are supposed to learn from this and see Jewish history as a real phenomenon that we are living in. We don't look at ourselves as individuals in a vacuum. We don't happen to be living in a certain time and place—unconnected to anything before. We are part of a continuum which stretches all the way back. And the conditions we find ourselves in today are the effects of what Jews did in previous generations.

The Rambam in Hilchos Taanis explains why we have fast days. Why we fast on Tzom Gedaliah is a fascinating question. If a disaster happened to Klal Yisroel, it was because of a specific failing that they were punished for. Just to fast without understanding the lesson to be learned and without being changed and improved, is a horrible wasted opportunity. A fast day is there to grow and avoid the mistakes of the past. We can't understand all the hidden things. But whatever is revealed is incumbent upon us to pay attention to and learn from.

We are not doomed to experience the kloles of the bris. If we learn from Jewish history and correct the mistakes, and we keep the Torah the way we should, we can lift our level and bring the Moshiach.

In the middle of this description of the bris, we have a few pesukim of encouragement.

People might be tempted to think the Torah's demands are just too great, too burdensome. People think the Torah isn't taking into account the reality of human nature and the human condition. To this the pesukim tell us that "it" is not too distant from us. The meforshim say this refers to limud haTorah and kiyum hamitzvos. It is vitally important to realize this because Hashem created the world and created the human being from the blueprint of the Torah. His very existence and his path to perfection is all mapped out by the Torah's plans. It is impossible to conceive that the demands of the Torah did not take human nature into account. Human nature comes from the Torah! It may be easy and it may be hard, but it is built in to the fabric of existence. We say each morning that the Torah is true for our generations and all future generations. The challenge is for us to adjust our personalities, our predispositions to the Torah's demands. Just like we adjust our physical lives to the limitations of physical law, so too we adjust our thoughts, feelings and actions to the limitations of the Torah's laws.

Then the posuk says the Torah is not in shomayim. Rashi explains that not only is keeping the mitzvos of the Torah within every Jew's grasp, but understanding the Torah is as well. This is why the Rambam in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah says every man, woman and child is able to understand the Torah on some level. Not necessarily on the highest level, but it is just a question of if you want it or you don't.

Torah is not a luxury, it is a necessity. It is the oxygen of a Jew and it must be obtained no matter what it takes. If a person has a fatal illness and found out there is a cure somewhere in the Far East, he wouldn't hesitate to get on a plane and get it. This has to be our attitude to Torah. But we are fortunate—the Torah is totally accessible. It is just a matter of will and determination.

There is no other book in the world that is so rich and multi-layered that we can all learn the same words and come away with different ideas and different depths of understanding. No matter how many times you learn the parsha, if you put in the effort, new insights will always come out of it every year and at every stage in life. Torah is available to everybody and this is why Torah can make demands on everybody.

Then we go back to brocho and kloloh because it ties in to the accessibility of Torah. If Torah wouldn't be accessible to us, then there can be no punishment for neglecting it.

There are brochos and klolos for keeping mitzvos, and there are brochos and klolos for limud haTorah. Churbon comes for bittul Torah. Why? Because even if one commits the most severe aveiros like avodo zoro, arayos and murder, limud Torah has the power to protect one from the churbon that should result from them. This is how the Netziv resolves the contradictory statements about the causes for churbon Bayis Rishon. This is the power of the Torah—it can protect against everything—even the worst aveiros. But once they neglected the Torah, they lost their protection.

This is why the accessibility of Torah is placed inside the brochos and klolos. Don't say the klolos are inevitable and there is no way to live up to the demands of the Torah.

People are also tempted to think that their behavior patterns are beyond their control—they don't believe they have the power to change. So the parsha now discusses teshuvoh. One might think the mitzvah of teshuvoh is superfluous. If you find yourself doing aveiros, you are obligated to stop—they are aveiros! But teshuvoh is much more than just halting the wrong behavior. Teshuvoh is the step-by-step process of remaking yourself into a person who is no longer capable of doing the aveiroh anymore. Our actions have an effect on our personalities. Doing aveiros changes us and moves us away from Hashem and from ruchniyus. Teshuvoh is the process of regaining that lost relationship with Hashem. We can make keeping Torah natural and second-nature, but that is only after you undergo a serious transformation.

This is why Rabbeinu Yechiel of Paris and Rabbeinu Yonah reacted the way they did to the tragedy of the sereifas hatalmud in France and the churbon of the French yeshivos. They could have easily blamed the churbon on the goyim, on the Pope, on anti-Semitism, etc. But they didn't. Instead they looked inward and discovered what went wrong in their avodas Hashem and tikkun hamiddos to deserve such a calamity. They started the process of teshuvoh to correct themselves. Likewise we must initiate the process of correcting ourselves to make sure we go from kloloh to brocho.

Parshas Vayelech has a frightening nevuoh—it predicts that after Moshe Rabbeinu dies, Klal Yisroel will violate the bris and Hashem will hide His face from them. This is the definition of brocho and kloloh. Brocho is having a connection with Hashem and through that, all good things come to us. Kloloh is hester ponim—after we have interfered with the kesher we had with Hashem. If we push Hashem out of our lives we lose that protective shield which has kept all the destructive forces of the world away from us. This is kloloh.

What is our reaction? The Ramban says we will recognize the loss of connection with Hashem and ask, "why this is happening to us?" The response is to increase the hester ponim to the extent that we won't even have that slightest clue that Hashem is there—not even behind the scenes—total abandonment. But the Ramban asks why does the hester ponim get worse after Klal Yisroel are thinking about teshuvoh? He answers that if you know you need to do teshuvoh and you don't do it, then Hashem gives up.

Whenever we confront the endless tragedies of history and the

ongoing threats to our existence, the answer is this shiroh—the Torah tells us what is causing it and where the solution lies.

Then we have the biggest brocho of the entire Chumash—no matter how bleak things may seem, the Torah promises that the Torah will never be forgotten. We will always come back to the Torah to re-energize and get inspired to move on.

We are getting closer to the yom hadin and it seems we are living in one of the most chaotic periods of history. After the Holocaust, people were convinced that we reached the absolute peak of anti-Semitism and this could never happen again. It seemed like the western world had finally realized its mistakes and outgrown such irrational, senseless hatred of Jews. But now we see open anti-Semitism all over the place. In Europe—France and England—it is out in the open—no one bothers to hide it anymore. Vicious incidents are happening all the time in America, Israel, everywhere. As long as you are religious, you are the cause of all the problems. Religious Jews are targets for everything.

One is tempted to say it is the secularists fault. But we have to look inward. We have to take the bris we have with Hashem more seriously. If we don't take our unique identity seriously ourselves, the non-Jews are surely waiting to remind us.

This looking inward to improve ourselves and correct our mistakes when national tragedy occurs has been our response throughout our history. When all the copies of the Talmud were burned publicly in France, Rabbeinu Yonah surmised that it was because the Rambam's stature and his seforim were not treated with sufficient respect. When the Spanish Inquisition expelled all its Jews, the Chosid Yaavetz said it was because the Spanish Jewish community neglected the learning of Torah. After the mass slaughter of Jews during the Chelminiki revolt, completely destroying whole communities, the Tosfos Yom Tov attributed it to trampling on the kovod of the Beis Haknesses. Something that we don't think is so serious can have far-reaching consequences.

Tzom Gedaliah is a painful day. It commemorates the time after the churbon Bayis Rishon when a small remnant of the Jewish community still remained in Eretz Yisroel. The yishuv was run by a tzaddik—Gedaliah ben Achikom, and there was a machlokes among the Jews regarding how to react to the coming threats. Gedaliah was killed as a result of the machlokes. After that, 70 years of total desolation followed. So what is the lesson of Tzom Gedaliah? That machlokes and not being sensitive to the kovod of talmidei chachomim produces tragedy. It destroys our communities.

We live in chaotic times and the world can explode tomorrow. How do we react to this situation?

What protects us? The bris we have with Hashem. The closer we are to Him, the more protection we merit. The further we draw away from Hashem, the easier it is for all the evil forces to take over and cause destruction.

This is one of the reasons that we read these parshiyos before Rosh Hashono. The lesson is to stop and look at ourselves. Look at the situation Klal Yisroel is in today. Are we keeping the bris? Are we making our connection with Hashem the source of our identity and who we are? We are a mamleches kohanim and goy kodosh. That is what we take pride in. We don't take pride in being a high-tech start-up nation, not our Nobel Prizes and advanced weaponry and military expertise. Those aren't the reasons we stood at Har Sinai and made a bris with Hashem 3,400 years ago and it is not the reason why we have survived till this day. That is not who we are and why we are still here. We have kochos hanefesh which can be redirected to be used to deny the bris and abandon our mission in the world. But that is an aberration. We were given these special kochos to live a superior life of kedushoh and closeness to Hashem. It is not to have the best army and fighters, etc. We are bnei bris and a mamleches kohanim.

This is the biggest cheshbon hanefesh we have to make going into Rosh Hashono and Yom Kippur.