

PARSHAS NITZAVIM

תשפ"א

This year before Rosh Hashonoh, we read Parshas Nitzovim which is an appropriate preparation for Rosh Hashonoh. In it, there is a new krisas bris which talks about consequences of Klal Yisroel's actions and the actions of all future generations that were not present at the time. It says there may be an individual or family or shevet in the future who will turn their back on the bris. Moshe Rabbeinu needs to address future generations because it is very difficult to imagine that large groups of Klal Yisroel would worship avodo zoro after all they went through in the midbor. So Moshe Rabbeinu takes into consideration that there may be a hidden root of avodo zoro now which will only be fully expressed later in history.

People think avodo zoro is something foreign to us and not particularly relevant in our lives. But this is wrong. Avodo zoro is very relevant in our lives. The basic concept behind avodo zoro is that it is opposed to the idea of kabbolas ol malchus shomayim which says Hashem is the only force and that He has absolute control over the world. Although there are natural forces in the world, Hashem is running everything – using those natural forces. Why do people resist this idea of malchus shomayim? It is because people want to feel they are in control of their lives. They find security in thinking they have the power to control nature. Whether it is climate control or controlling the virus, people need to convince themselves they control the world through science and technology – which is the avodo zoro of our times. So Hashem will show us through brochos and klolos that we are powerless – our control over nature is an illusion – and only Hashem controls the world.

After we are sent into golus, a generation will eventually come to realize that all the disasters in history were caused by their own spiritual failings. It isn't because of climate change and global warming. It is because of our aveiros. Being in golus doesn't mean you are in any specific geographic location. Wherever you are, it means realizing that human events are too crazy to be happening by themselves. You will wake up and do teshuvoh because you have to conclude Hashem is making everything happen. It is not clear if this is a mitzvah for Klal Yisroel to do, or a prediction that Hashem is guaranteeing will come about.

There is a machlokes in the gemara whether teshuvoh is necessary for Moshiach to come. The Rambam paskens that teshuvoh is necessary. But then the gemara asks, what if Klal Yisroel choose not to do teshuvoh? The gemara gives a frightening answer. Hashem will bring a king who will pass such harsh decrees that Klal Yisroel will have no choice but to do teshuvoh.

Then Hashem will bring us back and remove our orlas halev. What does this mean?

Human beings are insensitive to seeing Hashem in history and in their own lives. Hashem will remove that insensitivity and we will see the ruchniyus in the world. All the klolos will be removed and the geuloh will arrive.

The posuk continues to describe a mitzvah which is very close – it is right there in our mouths and hearts to do it. Which mitzvah is this? Some say it is referring to teshuvoh. The Sifri says it refers to the mitzvah of limud haTorah. The midrash in Bereishis says that the pesukim in the beginning of Bereishis, besides referring to creation, also refer to all the different exiles Klal Yisroel experienced. Yehi Or refers to the coming of Moshiach. But before that, the posuk talks about mayim, which means widespread learning of Torah. Eventually,

there will be the spread of limud haTorah throughout the entire world. Boruch Hashem, over the last 50-60 years, there has been an unbelievable explosion of limud haTorah in Klal Yisroel. The midrash says this is the prerequisite for Moshiach to come.

The posuk tells us: Don't think it is so difficult to achieve. You don't have to travel to shomayim or cross over the sea. Hashem makes it easy. But the implication is that limud haTorah is so important that if it was necessary, we would have to go to shomayim or cross over the sea to achieve it.

We read Nitzovim every year before Rosh Hashonoh. Sometimes we also read Vayelech before Rosh Hashonoh, sometimes it is after. In that parsha, we are promised that the Torah will never be forgotten by Klal Yisroel for the rest of human history. Chazal say it is one of the most important predictions made by the Torah. There have been influential cultures which tried to replace the Torah. 2400 years ago Greek culture had a tremendous impact on the western world. Yet no-one pays attention to them today outside the university. But till today, we are still learning the same Torah of 3500 years ago. If anyone wants to know why Yiddishkeit is so impressive, show them how much time and effort Klal Yisroel invest in trying to understand the Torah. Each posuk, each word, has endless layers of meaning – and the content of Torah grows and grows with each generation of lomdei Torah. No other book, no other culture in history can claim that it has been so widely studied by an entire nation over thousands of years.

This is a very necessary guarantee. We need the Torah to be around until the end of history in order for the geuloh to eventually come. It has to be on a massive scale. People complain that limud haTorah wasn't such a widespread phenomenon until our times. But the truth is we need Torah to be widespread specifically for our times. Yiddishkeit wouldn't survive without it. Moshiach won't come without it.

The pesukim in this parsha say we will be shaken up by the klolos and we have to take the lessons of those shake-ups to heart and do teshuvoh. Over the past year and a half, we have experienced one of the biggest shake-ups in the world's history. The Rambam says that when catastrophes happen to an individual, to a community or to the world, it means there is a problem that needs to be checked and corrected by the individual, by the community or by the world. The Rambam proves it for a community from the destruction of Sdom, and on a global scale from the catastrophe of the mabul.

Let's ask ourselves: when was the last time there was a catastrophe which affected the entire world? Even the world wars didn't affect large areas of the globe. Not since the mabul have we experienced a global calamity that requires a world-wide cheshbon hanefesh. Hashem is showing us that He is not happy with the world at large. But the Rambam is writing this in Hilchos Teshuvoh in order to teach Klal Yisroel. He doesn't expect the non-Jews in remote regions to start making this cheshbon hanefesh. If there is something to be learned from the global shake-up of the past year and a half, it is that Klal Yisroel have adopted the problems of the world and we need to realize that our deep connection to the world at large is what puts us in danger.

When Hashem destroyed Sdom, He told Lot and his family not to look back while they are escaping. What was the problem of looking back? Was there some kind of radiation that would affect them if they turned to see the destruction? The answer is that as long as they felt any

identification with Sdom, they will share their fate. In order to survive the destruction of Sdom, Lot and his family had to separate themselves totally from the society of Sdom. Sever all your connections to them, and you'll be saved. Lot's wife couldn't break her ties with Sdom – she had friends, she felt she still belonged there. So she looked back and was caught in their destruction.

We see the world suffering deep troubles and it shows us there is some deep problem with the world. Hashem is unhappy with it – because it has lost any connection to spiritual values. Religion is dead in Europe and it is dying in America. The world worships the physical – there is only science and technology. Because of that, there is unlimited pursuit of znus and taivoh.

Unfortunately, our own society has become affected by this – we are a part of this corrupt world in worshipping the physical and not the spiritual. It is not to the same extent, but we share the same outlook on life. Being a mamleches kohanim and a goy kodosh means we represent the idea that the world is based on spiritual values. This is why limud haTorah is so vital for the geuloh. If we are too involved in how the rest of the world looks at events that are going on, we won't be able to recognize Hashem in the world and how He is running the world.

Doctors have told me that this virus is different than any virus we have seen before. It is not obeying any of the rules. Hashem has clearly sent

something to the world that has no understanding. The death rate in America doubles every two weeks. This is after all the vaccines and after all the claims that we have everything under control through science. But we are not in control. Hashem has sent a decree against the entire world! He is waking us up and making us realize that something is deeply wrong with the world. We have to distance ourselves from the world and declare that we have a different life, a different culture, and different values.

There are natural disasters which are tearing the world to pieces. Wildfires, hurricanes, etc. People try to explain it away by calling it global warming. But it doesn't matter what you call it. We believe that giving it a name doesn't change the fact that Hashem is sending it to the world to send us a message that He is running the world and He is not happy with what's going on. The biggest testimony that exists which proves Hashem is running the world is the survival of limud haTorah throughout history and the incredible explosion of limud haTorah when the rest of the world is falling apart.

But it means we have to take those lessons deeply to ourselves – we need to appreciate why limud haTorah is so necessary to our survival in golus and to bring geuloh. Through it, we connect to a whole different world of spiritual values and ideals. Don't think it is so difficult. Hashem gave every Jew a natural affinity to connect with the Torah and its spiritual message. This is the deep lesson we have to learn before Rosh Hashonoh, and eventually the whole world has to learn it as well.