

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Nitzavim

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UNIQUE POTENTIAL

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers... from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:9-10)

The Ohr HaChaim asks why Moshe divided everyone into categories. Why didn't Moshe just include everyone together and say that all of *Bnei Yisrael*, as one unit, are standing before Hashem today?

The Ohr HaChaim explains that Moshe was teaching *Klal Yisrael* that each person and group is only expected to fulfill the purpose that he, she or they were given. The heads of the *shevatim*, the *zekeinim* and the officers were each responsible to complete their mission only; no one is expected to fulfill someone else's role. It is for this reason that Moshe went out of his way to categorize each group specifically.

When we evaluate who we are, we often assess ourselves based on others. We ask ourselves: "Why aren't I as successful as him or her? Why is that person a better *davener*? How does that person do more *chesed* than I do? How come I don't have the same impact as him or her?"

The Ohr HaChaim is teaching us a very powerful lesson. We are only expected to become the best version of ourselves, using the individual talents and abilities that Hashem has given to us. Hashem judges us based on our own unique capabilities.

As we reflect on our accomplishments of this past year and examine the areas we need to work on during this upcoming year, we need to stop worrying about how we measure up relative to other people. Instead, we must start focusing on who we are and who we can become with the abilities that Hashem has given to us.

UNITED PROTECTION

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d..." (29:9)

Rashi asks why this *Parsha* was written immediately after the array of curses found in the previous *Parsha*. He answers that the Jewish People approached Moshe after hearing all of the curses and said to him, "Who can bear these?" So Moshe began to console them and said, "You are standing today" as if to say that there was no need to fear, for even though you have angered Hashem on many occasions, He has still not destroyed you.

Rashi seems to leave out the reason why the Jewish People should not fear. After all, what was the merit that allowed them to remain standing before Hashem? The Darchei Mussar suggests that the verse's seemingly superfluous words "all of you" may provide an answer. He suggests that the merit of the entire Jewish People standing together as one unit is the merit that causes the Jewish People to find favor in Hashem's eyes. When we stand before Hashem as mere individuals, He scrutinizes our actions as individuals. But when we stand before Hashem as a People, He looks at our collective mass of good deeds and thus the individual finds favor as part of the nation.

For this reason, explains the Alter of Kelm, when one approaches Yom Kippur, when the entire world is judged for its deeds, the Jewish People as a whole are always guaranteed to survive even the strictest judgment. Therefore, every individual should attach himself to the wider needs of the Jewish People, whether it is by teaching Torah to others, helping those in need, or other acts of kindness. Through this, explains the Alter of Kelm, the individual makes himself an indispensable part of the "People" and as such, he connects himself to the favorable judgment that they are bound to receive.

TOO BIG TO FAIL

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d..." (29:9)

The Zohar comments that the word "היום" (today) in this *pasuk* refers to Rosh Hashanah, the day when we stand in judgment before the King of the world.

The Toldos Yaakov Yosef, the famous *talmid* of the Ba'al Shem Tov, explains that this *pasuk* alludes to us how we are to approach the judgment on Rosh Hashanah. The greatest strategy we have going into this trial is אתם נצבים היום כולכם, to stand before Hashem together with the rest of the nation; to get more involved, to dispense more kindness, to build more and stronger connections with our fellow Jews, to try harder to encourage and uplift other people.

The key to earning a favorable judgment is *achdus*, bonding with the rest of the nation, and remembering that we're all in this together.

A small neighborhood bank can be put out of business pretty easily, but the larger banks are too large to fail. *Klal Yisrael*, too, is too big to fail. If we stand before Hashem alone, as individuals, then we put ourselves at risk. But if we come together as a single, united people, then we will succeed.

Normally, when a person has a very important trial coming up, he is completely consumed by the preparations for the trial, meeting with lawyers and going over the paperwork, to the extent that he has no time for anything else. If somebody would ask him if he could host him for dinner, he would of course say he can't host anybody. He has no time to meet someone for coffee, to write a check to charity, for anything. He's too busy, and his mind is preoccupied. As we prepare for Rosh Hashanah, however, the precise opposite is true. We are to precisely spend more time connecting with others, inviting people, calling people, complimenting people, visiting people, giving support and encouragement, getting more involved in the community, looking for more ways to help out, to contribute, and to make a difference.

אתם נצבים היום כולכם. The best way to prepare for Rosh Hashanah is to bond together with our fellow Jews. We must not make the mistake of recoiling, keeping to ourselves. To the contrary, we must do what we can to stand together with the community and with *Klal Yisrael*.

The Mishna in Avos (2:13) teaches, אל תהי רשע בעיני עצמך - literally, "Do not be evil in your own eyes." But the Toldos Yaakov Yosef explains this to mean that a person is a רשע when בעיני עצמך - his eyes are turned inward, to himself. We should never retreat into ourselves, caring only about our own needs and concerns. We need to be part of the community, involved members of *Am Yisrael*. When we are, we know we will succeed, because *Am Yisrael* is too big to fail.

KEEP IT MOVING

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d..." (29:9)

Angels are referred to as *omdim* (stationary), whereas people are referred to as *holchim* (moving). Angels are considered perfect as soon as they are created and cannot improve or grow in any way. Man, on the other hand, is created with many imperfections, as we say each time we make the blessing of *Borei nefashos rabbos v'chesronan* - "Who creates many souls and their imperfections." We praise Hashem for purposely creating us with all sorts of deficiencies, so that we can fulfill our life's mission by constantly striving to grow and improve. In this way, we can achieve heights far beyond angels, who do not have to exert any effort to achieve perfection.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski zt'l points out that Moshe Rabbeinu was rebuking *Klal Yisrael* with these words. He was telling his beloved nation: "You stand this day." Look how lax you are, just standing in one place, not improving and not progressing.

In *Yiddishkeit*, we are not meant to find a level on which we feel comfortable with ourselves and then not attempt to elevate ourselves. No, we must keep moving upward and onward.

SUPERNATURAL SURVIVAL

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, your heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel..." (29:9)

Our sages tell us that these words mean that the survival of the Jewish people (our "standing") depends directly on G-d's will (i.e., is "before G-d"), rather than on the laws of cause and effect that He has embedded within nature. All other nations are subject to the laws and processes of nature, and therefore must master the natural arts of survival - including diplomacy and self-defense. The survival of the Jewish people, in contrast, depends solely on their loyalty to their covenant with G-d. If we remain true to G-d, our use of the natural avenues of survival will work, even in situations where they normally would not. If we abrogate the covenant, however, the natural avenues will not succeed, no matter how much effort we pour into them.

Therefore, no matter how dire the Jewish people's situation may seem, we can remain optimistic. Even if it seems as though, in the words of our sages, we are "a lone sheep surrounded by seventy wolves," we should renew and strengthen our commitment to our covenant with G-d. G-d will then crown our natural efforts with supernatural success. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 1, pp. 215-216) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

STANDING UNITED

Reb Noson of Breslov

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, your heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel..." (29:9)

Moshe gathered all the people, for he was able to illumine every single Jew. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 35a)

Parashat Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh HaShanah. Since it takes a unity of people joining together with love to mitigate the decrees of the Day of Judgment, Moshe advises us to "stand" together.

On a symbolic level, "you" refers to the person, "standing" refers to the place, and "today" refers to time. By joining together, we connect the concepts of person, space and time and bring them before G-d. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 145b-146a)

"Standing" connotes prayer. (Berakhot 6b)

The Torah lists ten types of people: your leaders, your tribal heads, your elders, your officers, every man of Israel, your children, your women, your converts, those who cut lumber, and those who draw water. This teaches us the importance of unity, for all Jews, from the greatest to the smallest, must join together so their prayers can ascend on high. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 209a)

The curses are what make you stand upright. (Rashi on 29:12)

Each person must endure suffering. But that very suffering molds his ability to withstand the pressures of daily life, and strengthens him to face the future.

"Whoever is not here" - even future generations. (Rashi on 29:14)

"Today" is the most important day of your life, because it can and will have an effect on you and on all your future descendants. Our Sages (Makkot 23b) teach: "When a person performs a *mitzvah*, he brings credit to himself, his family, and all his future generations, forever." The converse is also true: an evil deed sends repercussions into one's present and future. Therefore "today" is the most important day of your life. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 146a)

Just as the day is continual, with darkness leading to light, so too, you will always be here and G-d will illumine for you. (Rashi on 29:12)

The darkening of day refers to the confusion wrought by the evil inclination. The illumination of day refers to the ability of a person to overcome evil. Each day contains both. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 440)

LOVING ONE ANOTHER

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers... from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:9-10)

How can we truly unite? After all, some of us are "leaders" while others are "water drawers" and the like. What could Jews of such a wide spectrum social standing possibly have in common?

The answer to this is threefold: First, who is to say who is ultimately higher on the ladder of achievement? Appearances can be deceiving, and we tend to over-evaluate ourselves while under-evaluating others.

Second, even if we have evaluated ourselves correctly, just because we excel in one particular aspect of life does not mean that there are not other aspects of life in which others exceed us. Everyone is a leader in some way; therefore, our collective success depends on every Jew's unique contribution.

Third, the difference between the Creator and any creature is infinite. Realizing our own puniness relative to G-d's absolute reality eliminates any feelings of superiority we may have over other people.

When we consider these three perspectives, we can truly stand together, united, not only with feelings of love toward each other but with behavior that testifies to the truth of these feelings. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 2, pp. 398-400)
- Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

BEHIND THE SCENES

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, your heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel..." (29:9)

Moshe gathers the Jews on the final day of his earthly life to enter them into another covenant with G-d. Moshe declares that everyone is standing before G-d, and lists leaders, tribes, elders, officers, and every man of Israel (29:9-11). The one term that doesn't seem to belong in this group is "tribes" since it doesn't refer to a specific person, whereas all the other terms do.

While Rashi suggests that the term goes together with leaders to read "tribal leaders," the wording in the *pasuk* seems to indicate a separate group. Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis proposes that the term "tribes" refers, in fact, to the people who run the tribes behind the scenes. This term conveys the essence of what we should be; not people focused on titles, but people that do what matters and what needs to be done. Greatness is not achieved through positions or titles but through exemplary behavior and deeds. Rosh Hashanah approaches as we read this parashah, reminding us that our focus should remain on positive actions that generate meaningful change.

LASTING CHANGE

Rabbi Avi Wiesenfeld

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, your heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel..." (29:9)

This week's *Parshah* is always read right before Rosh Hashanah. The word "*Nitzavim*" means "standing," an appropriate introduction to set the stage for the mood of the upcoming *Yamim Noraim*, when we will be standing in front of the *Ribono Shel Olam* to start the process of *teshuvah*, beginning with *Selichos*. In some years, however, *Parshas Nitzavim* is read together with *Parshas Vayelech*. While "*Nitzavim*" means to stand, "*Vayelech*" has the opposite meaning - "to go."

The connection of these two *Parshiyos* teaches us that while we have to stand still in order to contemplate where we are holding in our *avodas Hashem*, we also have to move on. In addition to standing still and taking stock of our accomplishments, we also need to focus on the year ahead and make commitments to ensure its productivity.

The *mashal* is told of a man who booked a vacation in a particular resort. When he arrived, he was extremely disappointed to find that the accommodations were not so comfortable, the food was not so good, and the service was virtually non-existent. He made peace with it nonetheless and decided to make the best of it.

A few days into his vacation he went to visit a friend of his who was staying in a different resort just down the road. He was amazed to see how his friend was enjoying the most comfortable accommodations, exquisite cuisine, and amazing service. He asked his friend how much he had paid to stay in that resort. Upon hearing that his friend paid even less than he did, he became incredulous.

He went back to his resort, started packing his bags, and told the owner that he's leaving. When asked why, the man explained how the service and food is simply terrible.

The owner begged the man to give him another chance. "If you leave," the owner reasoned, "everyone will leave, and this is my *parnasah*. Tell me what you need and I'll do everything in my power to provide you with the very best. I'll upgrade the food and make sure the service is as it should be."

The guest agreed to stay. Indeed, the owner kept his word and within a few days the food and service were really incredible. However, although the owner had the best of intentions, the accommodations remained the same.

Sometimes, we might feel uplifted by *Selichos*, we become inspired by the sound of the *shofar*, and we start to accept new commitments upon ourselves. We learn more Torah, we become more conscious of our conduct with our friends, but we remain the same people with the same *middos*. As we make these improvements in our *avodas Hashem*, we also have to make sure we change the "accommodations" in addition to upgrading the food and service.

The message of this week's *Parshah* reminds us of two important components to real, lasting change. We have to be "*Nitzavim*" and stand still and beg Hashem for a good life, but we also must not forget to be "*Vayelech*" - to move forward and truly transform ourselves upon the arrival of the new year and its blessings.

DRAWING WISDOM

Rabbi Avigdor Miller

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers... from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:9-10)

What is the benefit of undergoing deep introspection? If you get the knack of using your mind as a bucket, and you lower the bucket into the depths of your soul, you will discover that there is endless wisdom deep down there. The longer the rope, the more deeply you can lower that bucket into your mind and draw forth precious wisdom that will flow without end.

UNIQUE PURPOSE

Rabbi Yaakov Klein

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers... from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:9-10)

Because our communities are headed by *tzaddikim*, *Rabbonim*, *askanim*, and *yorei shomayim* in other leadership capacities who lead with love, care, and devotion, we often draw a distinction between those in distinguished positions of prestige and authority and, so to speak, "simple Jews" who are struggling to connect to Hashem by means of His Torah and *mitzvos* as they fight the battles of everyday life.

But in truth, these distinctions exist only on an external level. The Izhbitzer Rebbe teaches that Hashem's hierarchal value system works differently than ours. To Him, it matters not how impressive or important someone appears on the outside - all that matters is if the person is fulfilling the purpose for which Hashem has sent him to the world.

Our *parsha* opens: "You stand today, all of you" - every member of *Am Yisrael* stands equally close to the Master of the world. "Before Hashem your G-d" - If we are indeed trying our hardest to accomplish the specific mission Hashem has sent us for. "Your leaders, your tribal heads... from wood chopper to water carrier" - It makes little difference how prestigious or lowly our individual roles in Hashem's Masterplan appear to be on the outside.

To Hashem, what truly matters is that we act with simplicity and truth, not trying to copy any particular *tzaddik*, but rather to grow into the best version of ourselves. This alone is what He most desires.

ALWAYS RELEVANT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers... from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:9-10)

In these verses, G-d tells us that He made His covenant with all of us - with every type of Jew, regardless of status, gender, or age. Inasmuch as the chief instrument of this covenant is the Torah, this means that every word of the Torah is relevant to every Jew, containing a lesson for even the youngest and uninitiated. Of course, every word of the Torah also contains infinitely more insights, of infinite sophistication and depth, which can only be understood by those with the requisite background. But these deeper levels of meaning are additional to the Torah's basic, simple meaning and lessons.

Thus, regardless of our background, the entire Torah is relevant to each of us in a way that we can immediately understand and appreciate. The deeper meanings of the Torah's words indeed beckon us, but we must always first and foremost seek to understand the Torah's message for us implicit in its simplest, most accessible meaning. (Sichot Kodesh 5739, vol. 1, pp. 235-236) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

STILL STANDING

Rabbi Avi Wiesenfeld

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, your heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel..." (29:9)

The Gemara in Maseches Megillah (31b) says that Ezra HaSofer instituted that the *Klalos* (curses) in *Toras Kohanim* (*Parshas Bechukosai*) be read from the Torah right before Shavuot, and the *Klalos* in *Mishneh Torah* (*Parshas Ki Savo*) be read right before Rosh Hashanah. The Gemara inquires, why do we read the *Parshah* of the curses specifically prior to Rosh Hashanah? The Gemara answers that we want "the year and its curses" to end, meaning that we want all of the bad things to end with the conclusion of the year, in the hope of a favorable year ahead.

Tosfos there comments that this sequence is slightly problematic, as Rosh Hashanah is always preceded immediately by *Parshas Nitzavim*, while the *Klalos* are read from the previous week's *Parshah*, *Parshas Ki Savo*. Consequently, there is a week of interruption (of *Parshas Nitzavim*) between the reading of the *Klalos* and Rosh Hashanah, making the Gemara's reasoning unclear.

Many of the commentators discuss this question and offer a number of answers. I would like to suggest that the *Parshah* of *Nitzavim*, which falls between the *Parshah* of the *Klalos* and Rosh Hashanah, comes to teach us a fundamental attitude which is required of us as we enter the new year.

The *Parshah* begins with the words, אתם נצבים היום כלכם - "you are all standing here today." While it certainly is true that it is crucial for us to understand the concept of reward and punishment and to contemplate the fact that there are consequences for our actions, אתם נצבים היום "כלכם" comes to tell us something else. Hashem is saying: "Each and every one of you is standing here today, each filled with a limitless supply of potential and greatness waiting to be brought into reality through your hard work and efforts. Leave behind all of your mistakes and misdeeds. You are standing here today with a tremendous opportunity ahead."

We are presented each year with a unique opportunity to renew our commitment to ourselves, to reconnect with our inner desire to show up as our best selves and serve Hashem with all of our strengths the coming year. The reading of the *Klalos* - not on the Shabbos right before Rosh Hashanah but on the Shabbos two weeks before Rosh Hashanah - is a wake-up call for us to repent and pay attention to the severity of our sins. However, as we know, on Rosh Hashanah there is no formal prayer for repentance or forgiveness. This is because the day of Rosh Hashanah is devoted to coronating Hashem as our King and reaffirming our desire to serve Him through recognizing the potential that He bestowed in us.

It is possible for a person to despair when he reflects on the shortcomings of the previous year. "You are standing here today" tells us that the past is over and all that remains are our pure intentions for the future.

Although we must read the section of the curses in *Parshas Ki Savo* and be cognizant of the severe ramifications of our actions, it is not intended in any way to bring us down. On the contrary, the awareness it brings is meant to motivate us toward increased dedication and devotion to better ourselves and utilize all of our human faculties for the service of Hashem.

Hence, "אתם נצבים היום כלכם" is perfectly positioned between the reading of the curses in *Ki Savo* and Rosh Hashanah, to show us the importance of entering Rosh Hashanah with the confidence of knowing who we truly are and what a tremendous opportunity for greatness lays in store for us.

ENTERING THE KING'S PALACE

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d..." (29:9)

In this verse, Moshe is telling the Jewish People that they are standing before Hashem, about to enter into His covenant and accept upon themselves all the *mitzvos* of the Torah. Rav Shteinman asks that in truth, every one of us is constantly standing before Hashem; if so, what is the significance at this specific point in time that Moshe had to inform the Jewish People that they were standing before Hashem?

Perhaps one could answer as follows: While it is certainly true that we are constantly standing before Hashem, there are times when we are in effect, closer to Him in a very real way. If we imagine a land where the king governs over all his subjects, we can say that they are all under the watchful eye of the king - they are all “before him.” Each citizen is looked after by the king and enjoys a relationship with him, but their relationship is limited. However, a subject who approaches the king and offers to live in his palace and dedicate his entire life to the king, serving him in every way, twenty-four hours a day, is going to enjoy a much closer relationship with him.

Perhaps this is why Moshe informed the Jewish People that they were standing before Hashem. He was telling them that because they were about to enter into an eternal covenant with Hashem - to observe His Torah at all times - they were no longer merely subjects of the King, they were becoming loyal servants agreeing to live in the King’s palace! As such, they were about to be “before Hashem” in a way that they had never previously experienced.

Parashas Nitzavim always falls in the close lead-up to Rosh HaShanah. This, therefore, is a time when we are preparing to stand “before Hashem” in a very real way, ready to rededicate ourselves to His service as our King.

Just as the nation stood up, ready to enter into the covenant of Torah with excitement and trepidation (Yoma 4b), so too, we should approach these days with awe and anticipation as we stand up and tell Hashem, we are ready!

NATION OF UNITY

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

“You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, your heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel...” (29:9)

Parshas Nitzavim begins on the heels of the frightening תוכחה, the lengthy description of the dreadful calamities that Moshe warns would befall *Bnei Yisrael* if they abandon the *mitzvos*. Now, Moshe turns to the people and proclaims, אתם נצבים היום כולכם לפני ה' אלוהיכם, - “You stand today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d.”

The root נצב denotes not simply “standing,” but standing tall, proud and triumphant. And thus Rashi (29:12) explains that Moshe here was reassuring *Bnei Yisrael* after presenting to them the curses of the תוכחה. He was telling them, in Rashi’s words:

הרבה הכעסתם למקום ולא עשה אתכם בלייה והרי אתם קיימים לפניו - “You angered the Almighty a great deal, and yet He did not annihilate you, and behold you still exist before Him.”

Moshe assured the people that despite the warnings, they should feel confident in Hashem’s compassion and forgiveness, because, after all, they had sinned in the past, and yet they were still נצבים, standing tall and proud.

The Slonimer Rebbe raises the question of why Moshe would “pull the carpet out” from underneath the תוכחה. The entire purpose of the תוכחה was to motivate the people by impressing upon them their accountability, that they would be called to task for their wrongdoing. It seems that the pronouncement of אתם נצבים היום כולכם completely undermines this warning, and the entire message of the תוכחה, by guaranteeing the people that they will be ok no matter what.

The Slonimer Rebbe answers this question by focusing on the word כולכם - “all of you.” Moshe was telling the people that the secret to their continuity and eternal survival is כולכם, coming altogether, connecting to one another, living as part of the *klal*. *Am Yisrael* is the עם הנצח, the eternal nation, which has been guaranteed to survive for all time. The way we achieve eternity, then, is by connecting with *Klal Yisrael*, by living not as individuals, but rather as part of the עם הנצח.

This is true also of the judgment on Rosh Hashanah, for which we are currently preparing. If we isolate ourselves from the *klal*, then we will be judged solely on our own merits, individually, and we will thus run the risk of a harsh judgment. But if we are part of *Klal Yisrael*, if we live and work as members of the *tzibur*, then we are judged not only on our own personal merits, but as part of the *tzibur*.

I have often cited the teaching of Rav Yisrael Salanter that the key to earning a favorable judgment on Rosh Hashanah is to be a person of the *klal*, to be indispensable, to be somebody whom others count on. Let us ask ourselves, if we would just disappear, would people notice? Would there be important tasks which would go unfulfilled because of our absence? This is what it means to be connected with the *klal* - to be needed, someone whom people depend on. The way we are spared the horrors of the תוכחה is through כולכם - by connecting with the rest of *Am Yisrael* and living as committed members of the *klal*.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Butzina D’Nehora

“You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers... from your woodcutters to your water drawers...” (29:9-10)

Whenever the need arises to take action on Judaism’s behalf, to wage the good fight for G-d’s glory, the people all protest: “Why choose me of all people? Leave it to the teachers, the rabbis, the leaders of the community. What can an ordinary citizen like myself do?”

However, they are in grave error. When the need arises to act “before Hashem, your G-d,” you must be “standing... all of you,” prepared for action, from your “heads” and “tribes” down to “your woodcutters to your water drawers” (29:10). The entire people must unite and not be content to leave the responsibility to their leaders.

HUMBLE CONTRIBUTIONS

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers... from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:9-10)

Rashi comments that the woodcutters and water-drawers mentioned by Moshe in this opening *pasuk* were people who converted and joined *Bnei Yisrael* while they were in the desert. In Sefer Yehoshua (9), we read of the Givonim who came during Yehoshua's time and made a pact with *Bnei Yisrael*, and they were appointed as woodcutters and water-drawers. From our *pasuk* here at the beginning of *Parshas Nitzavim*, Rashi writes, it appears that during Moshe's time, too, while *Bnei Yisrael* were still in the desert, there was a group that came to join *Bnei Yisrael*, and they were hired to work as the nation's woodcutters and water-drawers.

Rav Yosef Sorotzkin, in Meged Yosef, raises the question of why *Bnei Yisrael* would have needed these jobs done in the desert. There weren't trees in the desert, and *Bnei Yisrael* were provided with water supernaturally, from a well that journeyed with them. For what purpose did they need laborers to chop wood and carry water?

Rav Sorotzkin leaves this question unanswered.

I would humbly suggest that the expression *מחוטב עציך* is to be understood allegorically. The Torah here is teaching us that the people we want to join our nation are those who are willing to fill any role that is needed, even roles which do not bring fame or prestige. We don't want somebody to join our nation to become a *shul* president, to assume a prominent position in a Jewish community. We want people who are willing to become *חוטב עציך* and *שואב מימך*, who are driven by the sincere desire to contribute in whatever capacity they can, without aspiring to positions of grandeur.

Needless to say, this is true not only of converts, but also to all of us. Our membership in *Am Yisrael* requires us to pitch in wherever we are needed, even if this means performing simple, menial tasks. We must never make our community work about honor and prestige. We must have the humility to help out in any way we can, without seeking honor and glory.

PRECIOUS DIAMONDS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Your wives, and your convert who is in the midst of your camp; from your woodcutters to your water drawers." (29:10)

Moshe Rabbeinu begins the *parshah* by mentioning how the great men of *Klal Yisrael* are all standing before him to hear his final words. But then Moshe feels the need to include others: "Your children, your women, and the stranger in the midst of your camp; from your woodcutter to your water drawer."

What is unique about woodcutters and water drawers that Moshe specifically mentioned them?

A diamond merchant once met the Rebbe Rashab, Rav Shalom Dov Ber Schneerson zt'l of Lubavitch. The merchant expressed his bewilderment at the Rebbe's veneration of simple Jews.

"Why does the Rebbe devote so much of his precious time to them?"

"Did you bring any diamonds with you to sell at the fair?" the Rebbe replied.

When the man replied that he had, the Rebbe asked to see them. The man opened up his bag and showed off his sparkling diamonds. Then he pointed to one stone in particular. "This one has really special qualities."

The Rebbe replied, "I don't see anything special about it."

The merchant exclaimed, "Rebbe, to properly evaluate diamonds such as these, you have to be a diamond expert!"

At that point the Rebbe shot back, "Listen to what you just said! So it is with simple Jews; you also have to be an expert of their qualities in order to appreciate them!"

Every Jew is important to Hashem. Even a simple woodcutter or water drawer is important to Hashem. A person should never think, "Who am I? What value do I possess? How could I ever elevate myself like the great *tzaddikim* in order to come closer to Hashem?" Each person is important, and everyone can become close to Him, for each individual possesses special qualities.

True, some are covered with dust - the dust of sin - yet when we remove that dust each person can shine like a diamond. Every person can sparkle like a precious stone in the crown of the King of kings. (Pachad Dovid)

UNENDING DEVOTION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"To establish you today as His people, so that He can be your G-d, as He spoke concerning you and as He swore to your forefathers to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov." (29:12)

This verse was spoken by Moshe on the last day of his life. Being a true leader, Moshe remained concerned for his people's welfare up to the very end.

Furthermore, his concern for his people was not limited to his own generation but extended to all future generations of the Jewish people. He therefore, on G-d's behalf, selflessly devoted his last moments to cementing the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people, present and future, for all time.

Moshe's example can inspire us to selflessly devote ourselves to humanity's present and future betterment, thereby preparing ourselves and the rest of humanity for the true and ultimate Redemption. (Sichot Kodesh 5738, vol. 3, pp. 460-461) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

MAKING HISTORY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“Not with you alone do I forge this covenant and this oath, but with whoever is here, standing with us today before Hashem, our G-d, and with whoever is not here with us today.” (29:13-14)

Moshe establishes the Jewish people as G-d’s exclusive nation, and the covenant is not limited to those present on that day but includes all future generations (29:14). How can future generations be bound by a covenant they were not present to accept?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that just like being born is not our choice, we are still affected by what has come before us, and it is that which becomes part of our history and who we are. Just like the past influenced who we are, our actions determine what happens beyond us.

While future generations don’t get to choose the world they’ve inherited, they will get to leave their mark on what their future will see as the history of that world. We are part of the Jewish “his-story”; our choices and what we choose to make of our chapter will determine the future of our personal story.

ETERNAL COVENANT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Not with you alone do I forge this covenant and this oath, but with whoever is here, standing with us today before Hashem, our G-d, and with whoever is not here with us today.” (29:13-14)

The first covenant that G-d made with the Jewish people, at Har Sinai, transformed only that generation into G-d’s chosen people. In order for all Jews for all time to become G-d’s chosen people, a second covenant was required. Moshe made this covenant between G-d and the Jewish people forty years later, on the day of his death.

The first covenant was contingent upon the people’s loyalty to G-d, as is clear from the fact that it had to be renewed after the incident of the Golden Calf. This second covenant, however, is absolute. It cannot be nullified or canceled by any inconsistencies in our behavior.

The Jews who stood before Moshe when he established this covenant with G-d were our proxies. Thus, each of us, rather than being obligated to observe the commandments and being privileged to enjoy the accompanying unique relationship with G-d only indirectly (by virtue of being a descendant of past parties to G-d’s covenant) is a direct party to G-d’s covenant. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 19, pp. 266-272; ibid., vol. 24, pp. 188-191) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

Even today, affirming our covenant with G-d by resolving to study His Torah and perform His commandments immediately, spontaneously, and automatically unites us with every Jew in the world.

It also unites us with every generation of the Jewish people - past, present, and future. We thus benefit from the support of all Jews in all generations in our resolve.

We may be the smallest of nations, but when it comes to issues involving the Torah, the commandments, or fulfilling our broader Divine mission - to transform the world into G-d’s home - we need not fear being outnumbered. We stand together with the merits of all the generations of the Jewish people. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 19, p. 273) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

FREE FROM CONSTRAINTS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“You know how we dwelled in the land of Egypt...” (29:15)

G-d wants us to constantly recall that we were slaves in Egypt and that He freed us from this slavery. (Pesachim 16b)

The word for “Egypt” in Hebrew (*Mitzrayim*) means “constraints” (*meitzarim*). Allegorically, then, “Egypt” signifies our personal and collective spiritual constraints.

G-d wants us to also constantly feel how He continuously frees us from our personal and collective “Egypt.”

Conscious of our absolute, G-d-given freedom, we will never be slaves to any form of negativity or evil. We can freely choose to ignore the voices - both from within and from without - that urge us to go against G-d’s Will or to conform with any of the negative norms of our society. (Hitva’aduyot 5745, vol. 5, pp. 2989-2990) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

BITTER INDECISIVENESS

Yid HaKadosh

“Perhaps there is among you a root that bears poison and bitterness...” (29:17)

All bitterness comes from “perhaps.” When one wishes to serve Hashem intellectually by analyzing whether “perhaps” this knowledge is correct or this wisdom is better, then this “perhaps,” this ambivalence, is the “root that bears poison and bitterness” in serving Hashem.

INTEGRATING THE TORAH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Hashem will set him aside for evil from among all the tribes of Israel, like all the curses of the covenant written in this Torah scroll.” (29:20)

G-d’s desire is to shower us with His blessings - of longevity, health, wealth, happiness, peace, and so on. In order to enable us to create the proper vessel to hold these blessings, He has given us His instructions regarding how to live our lives: the Torah. It is therefore imperative that we relate to the Torah holistically, as a grand plan for individual and communal living.

It is tempting to evaluate which aspects of the Torah and its commandments seem reasonable to us and which do not, but this approach deprives us of experiencing G-d's involvement in our lives as an organic unity - a fully integrated system for transforming ourselves and actualizing our greatest potentials.

By embracing the full spectrum of the Torah's light and aspiring to live our lives accordingly, we enable ourselves to receive G-d's blessings to the fullest and most effective extent. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 14, pp. 108-113) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

TODAY CAN BE THE DAY

Kesav Sofer

"The secret things belong to Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, so that we may do all the words of this Torah." (29:28)

Redemption will be ushered in by two distinct eras. The first is the hidden one, the time ordained for the actual arrival of our deliverance, that is known only to G-d. But there is also another era that will be revealed and known before us; an era that will begin when the Jews repent of their sins.

The Sages say: "Even today, if only you will listen to My voice." Mashiach may come this very day, if only we will heed G-d's voice. When this day will come depends entirely on us and on our deeds, on whether we are willing to repent of our sins and mend our ways.

Thus, the Torah states: "The secret things belong to Hashem our G-d" - the time appointed for the actual deliverance is hidden from our view and known only to G-d, but "the revealed things" - the revealed era, "belongs to us and to our children forever, so that we may do all the words of this Torah." If we will faithfully observe the Torah's commandments, we can hasten the redemption so that it may even come this very day.

HIDDEN AND REVEALED

Reb Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye

"The secret things belong to Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children..." (29:28)

When one is involved in the material needs that are "for us and our children," such as earning a living, the physical side of us is revealed. The hidden refers to the spiritual side when one is attached to Hashem, our G-d.

OUT IN THE OPEN

M'Otzreinu HaYashan

"The secret things belong to Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, so that we may do all the words of this Torah." (29:28)

There are Jews who conceal their Jewish faith and belief from the world, until Hashem is the only One Who knows of it. We must take into consideration that the revealed things belong to us and to our children.

Our Judaism should be open and apparent at home, in the street, and most importantly, to our children.

BLESSING WITHIN THE CURSE

Kesav Sofer

"It will be when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse I have presented before you - then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you." (30:1)

It is during the time of the curse, when the Jews are in exile beset with oppressors and foes, that the blessing becomes most apparent.

That "blessing" is G-d's special care and providence that has permitted the Jewish people to survive despite all the persecution and oppression it has suffered at the hands of innumerable powerful nations.

As the Sages (Yoma 69) say: "But for the fear of Him, how could one single nation persist among the many nations?" If we reflect on the miracle that the blessing lies within the curse, that even in exile we have with us Divine Providence that "looks down from the windows and peers through the cracks" (Shir HaShirim 2:9) to protect us from the evil plans laid by our foes to destroy us, we must, of necessity, come to a point where we will take it to heart and repent.

MEMORABLE INCENTIVES

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"It will be when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse I have presented before you - then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you." (30:1)

Moshe informs the people that they should take note of the blessing and the curse placed before them when they are banished for sinning (30:1).

While it makes sense that the curses would be mentioned when referencing the people's sins, why are the blessings also mentioned here?

Ohr HaChaim suggests that we need to fully appreciate the blessings we are missing in order to feel genuine remorse. Remembering the good times will motivate us to improve our ways and regain what we once had.

The curses remind us of the strain that sins place on our relationships, and the blessings show us what's possible and motivate us to strengthen those relationships. A reminder of what was is a powerful harbinger (and tool) of what could be.

STILL HOLDING ON

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

"It will be when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse I have presented before you - then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you." (30:1)

The Alshich says that there is a big difference between an item that is thrown and one that is dispersed. When I throw something, it leaves my hand and lands in its place. When I disperse something or drag it to where it needs to go; I never actually let go of it.

The Alshich explains that even in our exile, we see the Hand of Hashem and His love for us. We are *nidachim* - scattered, and not *nishlachim* - thrown. Even in our exile, Hashem never lets go of us, as Chazal tell us that when we are in *galus*, we need to grieve for the fact that the *Shechinah* is in exile with us.

The Dubno Maggid (Otzar Chaim, p. 176) says that the idea that the Divine is also in exile with us is alluded to if we read the *pasuk* in the following way:

- והשבת אל לבבך - You need to be aware and place this information in your heart.
- בכל הגוים אשר הדיחך ה' אלוקך - Amongst all the nations to where Hashem, your G-d, dispersed you,
- עמו אנכי בצרה - He is here, as in

Rabbi Yonasan Eibeshitz (Talelei Oros, p. 192) writes on the verse (30:4): "If your dispersed will be at the ends of heaven, from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you in, and from there He will take you." When we fulfill the will of Hashem, we draw ourselves closer to heaven, to spirituality, and to Hashem. If we sin, we distance ourselves from heaven, and the more we sin, the greater the distance from heaven, until we reach *katzeh shamayim* - the furthest point from Heaven possible.

However, even if we are so far removed and find ourselves at that furthest point, Hashem will not abandon us, but rather יקבצך ומשם יקחך - "from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you in and from there He will take you," because He has never let go of us and is with us in our exile.

LOST AND FOUND

Reb Noson of Breslov

"You will return unto Hashem, your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul." (30:2)

"You will return" - even from the lowest levels, G-d will enable you to return to Him. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 420)

Sin causes a person to "lose" a part of his holiness, a spark of his soul. Just as one who loses an object must search for it, so too, a person must search for the "lost" particles of his soul.

Repentance means finding those lost sparks and "returning" them to their rightful place. Thus, it is written, "You will be lost... from there you will seek Hashem, your G-d, and you will find Him." (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 95a)

OUR INNER YEARNING

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"You will return unto Hashem, your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul." (30:2)

The Torah seems to repeat itself quite a number of times when discussing the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah*. In a span of ten *pesukim*, the requirement to "return" to Hashem through repentance is mentioned no less than seven times!

Furthermore, oftentimes a person is blinded and does not see his own character flaws. It is only once he begins to do *teshuvah* that he becomes aware of what he must correct.

This seems to lead one into a proverbial "Catch 22" situation! We must see our faults to do *teshuvah*, but we must do *teshuvah* to see our faults! So how does one begin?

The holy Baal Shem Tov zt'l explains that *teshuvah* is an act of *chessed* from Hashem. Every day a *bas kol* - Heavenly voice cries out imploring us all to do *teshuvah*. But while none of us actually hear the sound of this *bas kol*, our *neshamos* - souls hear it.

Our *neshamos* feel the holiness emanating forth and our *neshamos* yearn for closeness to Hashem. The more a person taps into his *neshamah* - his spiritual essence, the faster he will tune into the *bas kol*.

Therefore, once a person is stimulated and involves himself in spiritual pursuits, i.e. *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*, the sooner Hashem initiates and sets the *teshuvah* process in motion.

And how do we know that we are on the right track, that we are truly doing *teshuvah*? Says Rav Avraham Blumenkrantz zt'l, the Torah writes, "Return to Hashem, your G-d." Each and every Jew must do *teshuvah* until Hashem becomes "your G-d." When you feel a special *kesher*, a close personal bond with Hashem, you know you're on the right track, the track of proper repentance!

REPENTANCE = TRANQUILITY

Rebbe Nachman

"You will return unto Hashem, your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul." (30:2)

V'shavta (ושבת, you will return) has the same root as *Shabbat* (שבת). Shabbat is compared to the World to Come. The principal reward of Shabbat and the World to Come is an ever greater recognition of G-d. That is the nature of the "return to Hashem, your G-d."

V'shavta (ושבת, you will return) has the same root as Shabbat (שבת), indicating a connection between Shabbat and *Teshuvah* (תשובה, return or repentance).

There are two types of repentance: incomplete and complete. The first type is that of a person who is occupied in business and involved in the transient things of this world. In the midst of this, it occurs to him to repent, but afterwards he returns to his original behavior. This type of repentance corresponds to the six weekdays, which in turn parallel the six Mishnaic concepts - permitted and forbidden, fit and unfit, pure and impure. Such a person has no calm, being at one time forbidden, then at another time permitted; fit, then unfit; pure, then impure.

In contrast, a person who overcomes his trials and returns completely to G-d exemplifies complete repentance, which corresponds to Shabbat. Such a person has calm, because "when Shabbat comes, rest comes."

INFUSING DIVINITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You will return unto Hashem, your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul." (30:2)

Mistakes and failures are part of life, and thus, regret and resolve are also part of life. It is therefore important to understand how to properly repent for our misdeeds - what to regret and how to resolve to live in the future.

Mistakes and misdeeds are often the result of exaggerated or improper involvement in the material aspects of life. Aware of this, we may sometimes be inclined to avoid or renounce one or more aspects of our physical lives altogether. Such a reaction, however, can be a mistake. Our sages teach us that the proper response to our awareness of the pitfalls of material life is not to flee from it, but to infuse our material lives with Divine consciousness.

The way we learn and train ourselves to infuse our material lives with Divine consciousness is by studying G-d's Torah and observing His commandments. Thus, our desire to repair our lives fuels a renewed enthusiasm for our study of the Torah and our observance of its commandments. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 38, pp. 24-25) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

RISING ABOVE VS. DIGGING DEEPER

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You will return unto Hashem, your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul." (30:2)

Whereas we are here commanded to return to G-d with all our heart and soul, we have been commanded previously to love G-d not only with all our heart and soul, but with "all our might." What is the reason for this difference?

Loving G-d "with all our might" means being devoted to Him beyond what we consider "normal," i.e., beyond what makes sense logically. Repentance, on the other hand, requires that we forge a stronger relationship with G-d than our present one. That relationship with G-d, after all, was too weak to keep us from wrongdoing and therefore from needing to repent. We therefore need to deepen our feelings toward G-d, in order for Him to mean more to us than the indulgences that we have learned to rationalize.

Thus, whereas the Torah bids us to love G-d beyond what seems "normal," it bids us to repent by making what used to be "beyond" us into our new "normal." The processes associated with repentance and love are directly opposite, love taking us beyond our innate limitations and repentance bringing transcendence into limited consciousness. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 14, p. 120) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

ALWAYS ACCESSIBLE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Then Hashem, your G-d, will bring back your captivity Oand have mercy upon you, and He will gather you in from all the nations to which Hashem, your G-d, scattered you..." (30:3)

This phrase may also be read, "Hashem, your G-d, will return together with your exiles," implying that G-d, so to speak, accompanies us into exile.

This notion may be likened to the law that stipulates that when a student commits an act of unintentional murder, requiring him to be exiled to a city of refuge, his teacher must accompany him (Makkos 10a). G-d is our teacher and we are His students (Yeshayahu 54:13); thus, when we go into exile, G-d must go into exile along with us.

This means that G-d is just as accessible to us in exile as He was before we were exiled and as He will be after the Redemption. This includes all our states of personal "exile" - i.e., situations in which we feel estranged from holiness or apathetic to it. Even at such times, G-d is nearby; opening the lines of communication is entirely up to us. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 29, p. 38) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

COLLECTING THE SCATTERED

Rebbe Nachman

"Then Hashem, your G-d, will bring back your captivity Oand have mercy upon you, and He will gather you in from all the nations to which Hashem, your G-d, scattered you..." (30:3)

A person who sins fragments his *daat* (higher perception). Consequently, his sparks of holiness are scattered throughout the world. Through repentance, he begins the process of restoring his *daat* and elevating his sparks.

The phrase “your exiled ones” refers to the *daat* and holy sparks that are scattered throughout the world, awaiting rectification. Through the study of Torah, a person experiences a revelation of G-dliness, which causes him to repent. Thus, G-dliness - as attained through Torah study - leads to repentance, which will “bring back your exiled ones.” (See Likutey Moharan I, 105:1)

GRABBING THE GOOD

Reb Eliezer HaLevi Horowitz of Tarnigrad

“If your dispersed will be at the ends of the heavens, from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you in and from there He will take you.” (30:4)

Why does the verse state, “at the ends of the heavens,” and not “from the ends of the earth”? The Baal Shem Tov tried to find the good in the actions of the Jewish People. Even when he found someone who did not deal properly in business, he tried to find something positive on their behalf. Perhaps he had to pay tuition, wanted to give charity, or needed necessities for the Shabbat... Likewise, when you have transgressed but the end result is for the sake of heaven, then “from there Hashem, your G-d will gather you in” - from that little spark that might be in the transgression, and from that spark within your thought that was for heaven’s sake, you will be saved from going on the wrong path.

PURE HEART = PURE MIND

Rebbe Nachman

“Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your offspring, to love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul...” (30:6)

“Circumcise your heart” - this means G-d will do away with the foolishness of your heart. (Targum Onkelos)

When a person repents, he eradicates the foolishness that led him to sin and attains a pure heart. Then he can pray with a clear mind. (See Likutey Moharan I, 76:5)

REMOVING THE BLOCKAGES

Dubno Maggid

“Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your offspring, to love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” (30:6)

Once G-d removes the obstruction closing up your heart, you will be able to enjoy the Torah and its commandments and delight in them as much as you enjoy physical pleasures. Then you will love the Torah just as you love the other things that keep you alive; “that you may live.”

TAKING THE FIRST STEP

Kotzker Rebbe

“Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your offspring, to love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” (30:6)

It states in Devarim 10:16: “You shall circumcise the block of your heart.” However, in our *pasuk* it states: “Hashem will circumcise...”

This is because the individual must make a beginning. He must cut “the block” that is in the heart to accept Hashem’s word. However, changing from evil to good the human being cannot do by himself. Only Hashem can help, and that is why it states: “Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart.”

DOING OUR PART

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your offspring, to love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” (30:6)

The Kotzker Rebbe (Ohel Torah) notes that while in this *pasuk*, the Torah conveys to us that Hashem will circumcise our hearts, in *Parshas Eikev*, the Torah instructs us to circumcise our own hearts. How are we to reconcile this seeming contradiction?

The Kotzker Rebbe explains that the Torah is teaching us that we need to take the first step in initiating and developing a relationship with Hashem. Once we demonstrate effort on our end, by attempting to remove any barriers between us and Hashem, then Hashem will help eliminate any impediments.

This explains why in *Parshas Eikev*, the Torah instructs us to circumcise our hearts, and then here, in *Parshas Nitzavim*, Hashem communicates that He will help us with this process as well.

The Kotzker Rebbe adds that in order to really rid ourselves of those things that could lead us down the wrong path, we need Hashem’s help. However, Hashem’s assistance is contingent on our active participation.

As we progress through the month Elul, we must evaluate and determine which aspects of our relationship with Hashem need improvement.

Hashem is waiting to help us, but we have to do our part and demonstrate how much we desire a connection with Him.

Let us show Hashem who we really are by taking the first step, and Hashem will help carry us the rest of the way.

IT'S ALL GOOD

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You will return and listen to the voice of Hashem..." (30:8)

By "listening to G-d's voice," Moshe meant not only that we would obey G-d, but that we would recognize the inner message of His voice.

Our belief that G-d is good and that all He does is good enables us to thank Him for everything in life - even what seems to be the opposite of good. In the merit of this belief, G-d will eventually show us how everything He does is truly good. (Hitva'aduyot 5746, vol. 3, pp. 346-348) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SURPLUS OF KINDNESS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Hashem, your G-d, will make you abundant in all your handiwork... when Hashem will return to rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your forefathers." (30:9)

Mashal: The great rav of Yerushalayim, Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld zt'l, once hosted guests for the Shabbos of *Parshas Nitzavim*, just a few days before Rosh Hashanah. On *Motzei Shabbos*, the guests thanked him for his warm hospitality and parted ways, saying, "A gut voch (have a good week)!"

In response, R' Yosef Chaim replied with conviction, "And to you, a *gut yahr* (have a good year)!"

The people exited the rav's house and were halfway down the block when they heard someone running behind them in hot pursuit. Turning around, they were shocked to see R' Yosef Chaim himself flagging them down. Immediately, they stopped. "Is everything alright? Did we forget something?" they asked.

Shaking his head vigorously, R' Yosef Chaim answered, "No, you didn't forget anything. But as soon as you left, I recalled the words of Chazal, that one should always pay back a favor in greater measure than it was given. Since there are only a few days left in this year, when I said, '*Gut yahr*,' it was actually a lesser brachah than your wishes for a *gut voch*. Therefore, I came back to offer a proper response: *Gut yahr* twice - once for this year and once for the coming year!"

Nimshal: The Vilna Gaon zt'l (Yehoshua 2:12) explains the meaning of *chessed v'emes* - "kindness and truth," by quoting the words of the Sages: "One who is fed lentils by his friend is obligated to feed him stuffed pheasant in return."

When one repays a friend equal to what his friend has done for him, this is *emes*, truth. *Chessed*, on the other hand, is going the extra mile, doing a "surplus" of good. It is the obligation to extend oneself and "feed him stuffed pheasant"!

NONDEDUCTIBLE GOODNESS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"Hashem, your G-d, will make you abundant in all your handiwork - in the fruit of your womb, in the fruit of animals, and the fruit of your land - for good, when Hashem will return to rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your forefathers." (30:9)

The word for "will make you abundant" [והויתירך] can be related to the verb root that means "more than" and "remain" [יתר]. The Torah thus implies here that what G-d gives us in this world will not be deducted from our reward in the World to Come. This is because when He bestows goodness on us in this world, He derives pleasure from doing so.

[Thus, G-d bestows goodness upon us because He wants to, not in order to reward us for our good behavior. G-d therefore does not deduct the goodness that He bestows upon us in this world from our reward in the afterlife.]

This, then, is the denotation of the term "will make you abundant":

He will not subtract from our merits on account of our receiving goodness in this world. On the contrary, the benevolence we receive in this world is over and above [יתר] the reward that we will receive in the World to Come. He will leave over [ויתיר] our merits, and we will be rewarded for them in the World to Come.

Why? Because G-d enjoys giving us the goodness in this world. This is what the verse alludes to when it says, "For G-d will once again rejoice over you for good." Amen.

JOY TO HASHEM

Reb Dovid Shlomo Eibenschutz

"Hashem, your G-d, will make you abundant in all your handiwork - in the fruit of your womb, in the fruit of animals, and the fruit of your land - for good, when Hashem will return to rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your forefathers." (30:9)

There is a reason a reward is given for each *mitzvah*. For example: "If in my statutes you walk... Then will I give you rains in their due season" (Vayikra 26:3); "And it shall come to pass, if you will listen diligently to My commandments... That I will send rain for your land in its time..." (Devarim 11:13-14). Yet there is a statement in Avos (1:3): "Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward."

The intention should not be to perform a *mitzvah* to receive a reward and derive pleasure from the reward. The intent should be to give the Almighty pleasure, for He wishes to give benefits and rewards to His creation. That is the way to receive a reward: to feel that we are doing the will of Hashem.

HASHEM'S JOY IN GIVING

Tiferes Shlomo

"Hashem, your G-d, will make you abundant in all your handiwork – in the fruit of your womb, in the fruit of animals, and the fruit of your land – for good, when Hashem will return to rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your forefathers." (30:9)

G-d does good and takes enormous pleasure in doing good. Particularly, He takes delight in being able to deal kindly with the Jews.

Hence, once we repent of our sins and mend our ways - thereby enabling G-d to do good to us - we afford Him pleasure by the mere fact that we have made ourselves worthy of receiving His favors. This pleasure we give to G-d carries its own reward, quite apart from the reward due us for repentance.

Therefore, the Torah says: "G-d will give you surplus... for good" - G-d will give you good things over and beyond the reward for your repentance.

In addition, He will reward you for the fact that "G-d will rejoice over you for good"; this means that He will reward you for having made it possible, by your good deeds, for G-d to rejoice and to take pleasure at the thought that He will be able to do good to you.

IT'S ALL ABOUT CONNECTIONS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"When you listen to the voice of Hashem, to observe His commandments and His statutes, that are written in this Torah, when you shall return to Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul." (30:10)

When conveying the abundance that will follow when our relationship with G-d is restored, the Torah describes, "When you listen to the voice [singular] of G-d, to observe His commandments and statutes written [singular] in this Torah, when you return to the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul" (30:10).

If there are a myriad of commandments and statutes written in the Torah, why is the word "written" in singular? Also, why does the Torah use the word "listen" when specifically referring to the written word of the Torah?

Rav Hirsch suggests that although the Torah contains an abundance of rules, they all stem from one singular "voice" and point to one singular intent: of building and strengthening our hearts' and souls' connection to G-d.

Rather than getting caught up in the minutia of the laws, concentrating on their purpose (i.e., their voice, which takes into account the text and the intonation, reflecting emotion and affection) will guide us to integrity with our actions and intent, which will lead to true happiness. This synergy of action and intent is a practical tool for us to apply to all our interpersonal connections.

INNATE LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you, and it is not distant." (30:11)

All of us have the power to train our hearts to become emotionally involved with G-d through studying His Torah and observing His commandments. We possess this power in the form of an inherent, deep-seated love for G-d that is innate to our Divine soul.

This love is initially "hidden," i.e., we are not conscious of it. However, we can easily access it by means of a number of rather simple exercises in contemplating Divine providence, the vastness and beauty of creation, and so on. We therefore do not have to "manufacture" love of G-d or force ourselves, against our nature, to love Him. We already naturally love Him; all we have to do is open ourselves up to this love, allowing it to manifest itself. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 34, pp. 173-178) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SIMPLER THAN YOU MAY THINK

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you, and it is not distant." (30:11)

Mashal: A man who had a terrible drinking problem vehemently denied that he had a problem, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. No matter how much he drank and made a spectacle of himself, he would steadfastly maintain that he was perfectly in control, that he could hold his liquor.

Ultimately, he was forced to enter an alcohol treatment program. After a number of months, he finally began to show progress on his way to recovery.

It was then that he confided, "The real reason why I was so obstinate in refusing to admit that I had a drinking problem was because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to quit."

The man had known all along that he had a problem but denied it publicly because he feared he would fail if he tried to quit. He insisted there was no problem and thus continued his self-destructive behavior.

Nimshal: Some people think that the ability to grow and reach great heights in Torah and *Yiddishkeit* is an achievement that is only possible for a select few, the holy and wise men of *Bnei Yisrael*, but well beyond the reach of the average person. However, this is what Moshe was telling *Bnei Yisrael*. The Torah, with its six hundred and thirteen *mitzvos*, might appear so difficult to fulfill that people will say, "What's the use of trying? I can't possibly comply with all the requirements of the Torah." Not only is it possible, it's even simpler than one might think. All one has to do is make the decision, commit himself to it, and the rest will follow.

NOT TOO DIFFICULT

Reb Noson of Breslov

"For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you, and it is not distant." (30:11)

G-d asks only for a little bit of effort and expense on the part of each person. For the sacrifices, He asks for offerings of sheep and doves, not mountain goats or llamas. For the upkeep of the Temple, He asks for a half-shekel, not a whole shekel or many times that amount. *Tzitzit* cost very little, and the material for *tefillin* can be found easily, not in deserts or wildernesses but on nearby farms.

Rebbe Nachman once said (Tzaddik # 558), "The most awesome devotions to G-d are easier to attain than a small profit!" (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 474)

A WAY OF LIFE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"It is not in Heaven, [for you] to say, 'Who will go up to Heaven for us, and take it for us, and let us hear it, so that we can perform it?'" (30:12)

The Gemara (Shabbos 88b) relates that when Moshe Rabbeinu went up to Heaven to receive the Torah, the angels objected. The Torah should not be given to humans, they argued. The immense spiritual nature of the Torah requires it to remain in Heaven, in the domain of the angels. Moshe convinced them, however, that they had no right to the Torah since the *mitzvos* and events mentioned within the Torah apply to the Jewish People here on this world, and not to celestial beings. How is this to be understood? Did the angels not recognize the fact that they are incapable of performing the *mitzvos*?

Rav Yechezkel Abramsky zt'l answers that the angels were well aware of what is written in the Torah. They knew that they could not actually keep the *mitzvos* and they were even willing to let *Bnei Yisrael* have the Torah. What they really wanted, though, was that the Heavenly Court maintain the ultimate authority over the Torah's interpretation. The *halachic* rulings, they argued, are of such a lofty nature, that mere mortals are incapable of extracting the true interpretation of the Torah.

Moshe, however, reminded them that since angels could not fulfill the Torah, they had no right to decide its *halachic* rulings. One who is incapable of actually performing the *mitzvos* is likewise incapable of understanding their true depth. The study of Torah and its practical applications are inseparable. This became clear when our ancestors said, "*Na'aseh v'nishma*" on Har Sinai. These words convey a basic truth: "We will do," and only then, "we will hear." Performance of the *mitzvos* is what must accompany intense study and a real attempt to understand the *mitzvos'* true meaning.

The most brilliant interpretation by one who does not observe the Torah is accorded no weight; the Torah is first and foremost a way of life.

ALWAYS AVAILABLE

Toldos Yaakov Yosef

"It is not in Heaven, [for you] to say, 'Who will go up to Heaven for us, and take it for us, and let us hear it, so that we can perform it?'" (30:12)

One should not say that if he were to reside in a city that is replete with righteous people who are attached to the heavens, he would be able to serve Hashem. The Torah teaches us that it need not be "in the heavens" nor "across the sea" but "the matter is near to you" - on whatever level one has reached one can serve Hashem, for the Divine Presence is on all levels and everywhere.

FIT FOR ALL

Reb Noson of Breslov

"It is not in Heaven, [for you] to say, 'Who will go up to Heaven for us, and take it for us, and let us hear it, so that we can perform it?'" (30:12)

If it were in Heaven, you would have to go up there to study it. (Rashi)

In reality, there are no limits to how high a person can strive to attain spirituality. But G-d does not demand superhuman efforts. G-d knows that man is earthly in nature and cannot sustain a totally spiritual life.

Therefore, He brought the lofty Torah down to a worldly level - "in your mouth and your heart" - so that everyone, at his level, can do his best to fulfill it. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 508)

A CLEAR PATH HOME

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it." (30:14)

The "thing" referred to in this verse is the Torah in general (according to Rashi), and the directive to return to G-d in particular (according to the Ramban).

G-d assures us that we always possess the inner capability to lead full, consummate lives, no matter how far we are, physically or spiritually, from where we should be.

It is only a matter of exercising our free choice to do so. When inspired by an inner drive to return to G-d and cling to Him, studying the Torah and observing G-d's commandments become natural and accessible.

Returning to G-d, after all, is returning to our authentic, innermost selves. When we allow our inner essence to shine, the interference from conflicting drives and façades that we so often convince ourselves that we must maintain disappears. Our direction becomes clear, and we become surprised by the power we suddenly possess to improve our behavior, to inspire others, and to affect the world. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 34, pp. 171-172) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

INTERNAL HARMONY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it." (30:14)

In *Parashas Nitzavim*, Moshe famously explains that the commandments are there for us to observe and that “it is very close to you; it is in your mouth and your heart so that you can fulfill it” (30:14). Rashi explains that this curious mouth/heart wording refers to the Oral and Written Laws. While it makes sense for “in your mouth” to correspond to the Oral Laws, how does “in your heart” pertain to the Written Law? Wouldn’t it more literally be “on your bookshelves”?

One possible answer could be that after learning, analyzing, and appreciating G-d's laws, one would internalize them to the point where they are regarded naturally, from the heart. It could be that the *pasuk* is outlining an action plan for complete internal harmony.

The first step is to study and learn so that we appreciate the Torah's directions to the point where we internalize them. The second step is to express verbally what our heart feels, followed by the third step of acting on those thoughts and expressions. When our minds, words, and actions all align, we are ready to live life fully.

MAKING ROOM FOR DAAS

Rebbe Nachman

"The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it." (30:14)

There are two types of perceptions or spiritual lights: internal and transcendental. The perceptions that a person grasps with his intellect are said to be “contained” in his mind, while those that are impossible for him to understand are said to “surround” his mind from without, and are thus known as *makifin* (encircling).

When one speaks with friends in order to instill them with *daat* (knowledge of G-d) and fear of Heaven, and in order to produce disciples, his mind becomes “emptied” of his previous perceptions and he is able to internalize the light of the *makifin*, increasing his own knowledge and awareness of G-d. Thus, “The matter is very close to you” - in order to bring close the *makifin* - “in your mouth and your heart” - you must use your mouth to speak wisdom with others - “to do it” - and thereby internalize the transcendental perceptions. (See Likutey Moharan II, 7:6)

SPEAK FROM THE HEART

Reb Noson of Breslov

"The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it." (30:14)

To serve G-d properly, one must articulate his heart's desires. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 290)

The primary way to draw G-dliness is through “your mouth and your heart.” That is, your mouth and heart should be close to one another: what is in your mouth should be bound tightly to your heart. Whatever feelings you harbor in your heart, learn to articulate them.

KEEPING IT FRESH

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

"See, I placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil..." (30:15)

Rabbi Yosef Zvi HaLevi Dunner asks: Why is it necessary for the *pasuk* to include the word היום - today? It would have been equally understood if the word had been omitted and would have just read "Behold, I have set before you life and good." Why the extra word היום?

Rav Dunner notes that we find at least two other places in the Torah where the use of the word in seems superfluous, and in both places, Rashi makes the same comment. The first occasion is in the *pasuk* (Shemos 19:1) that reads: “In the third month of the children of Yisrael’s departure from Egypt, on this day (ביום הזה) they arrived in the desert of Sinai.” The second occasion is where it says (Devarim 11:13), “And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day (היום) to love Hashem, your G-d, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

In both cases, Rashi explains that the word היום or ביום means that the command that is being mentioned in the *pasuk* should be as fresh to you today as if you had just been commanded to observe it for the first time.

When it comes to *mitzvah* observance and our relationship with The Almighty, we need to keep things fresh, new, and exciting as if we were keeping the *mitzvos* for the very first time.

tell us that every day should feel to us as we have just arrived at Har Sinai and have just received the Torah directly from Hashem. If we could live at this level, our approach to every *mitzvah*, even those that we have been observing for many years, would be charged and energized.

Using this approach, Rav Danner suggests that the use of the word *own* in our *pasuk* comes to tell us that when it comes to the battle between good and evil, life and death, then *ראה נתתי לפניך היום* - every day needs to be approached as a new battle. Every day will present new challenges, and even if we were successful in overcoming the difficulties of yesterday, past performance is no guarantee that we will meet the challenges of today, even if those challenges turn out to be the very same ones we conquered yesterday. Every day poses new challenges, but also new opportunities to strengthen our relationship with Hashem and His Torah. We must never become complacent, lazy, or smug. The *yetzer hara* never rests, and we must be vigilant to succeed in overcoming him today as we did yesterday.

LIVING LIFE TO ITS FULLEST

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"See, I have placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life..." (30:15-19)

Moshe tells the Jews that there is free choice between good and evil, life and death, and that they should choose life so that they may live (30:19). Since it seems like an obvious choice, what can we glean from this that is not obvious and apparent?

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky comments that following the Torah's laws is not just a choice for life and its respective reward but a decision to live life to its fullest. He adds that the Torah doesn't just convey a life of rituals and rules but proposes a life filled with happiness and purpose.

NUANCED PERSPECTIVE

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

"See, I have placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life..." (30:15-19)

Sometimes a slight nuance in our perspective can make all the difference in the way we view the world. At the end of *Parashas Nitzavim* we are presented with a unique directive, "*U'vacharta ba'chaim*," we must choose life. This means that a person is obligated to live a life in accordance with the Torah (the good life). The verse states, "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live." Rashi likens this directive to that of a father who offers his son the choice of the finest portion for his inheritance. Then, immediately, the father points out to the son which portion is indeed the best.

The *Sefer HaZikaron*, an early commentary on Rashi, points out that this command is unique. Right after Hashem outlines the choices of a life of good, or the alternative, Hashem directs us to choose the good life. Ordinarily, when one wants someone to have a choice, he presents the options and allows the individual to choose. It is odd to present a choice and immediately offer direction on what to choose.

Rashi is addressing the essence of this directive. Ultimately, we all have free choice in how to live our lives. The goal of the command to choose the right option is not a practical directive. Rather, the idea is to present to us a nuance in our perspective. This directive allows us to relate to Hashem and His *mitzvos* differently. With this directive, we perceive the Almighty as a caring Father who is on our side; He wants what we want. He wants what is best for us and what will grant us the best life in this world and the next.

The idea presented here is intriguing. The fact that the Torah spells out for us that a life lived by its guidance will be a good life, a life of blessing, does not seem sufficient. There is an additional lesson to be learned.

The Torah is teaching us that we need to appreciate that the observance of the Torah does not just grant us blessing. Rather, it is to get the life we really want, the life that is best for us.

It is integral for us to have the image of a kind fatherly figure, encouraging, guiding, and pointing us in the direction to choose the finest life possible.

During these days of judgment, we focus on the solemnity of the time. We refocus our priorities, and concern ourselves with our spiritual tasks and duties. This, of course, is righteous and important. However, we must be sure to not leave out the idea behind the directive presented here, at the end of *Nitzavim*. We must not forget that our entire relationship with the Torah needs to be viewed with the understanding that a life of Torah and *mitzvos* is the best life for us.

After all is said and done, when the Torah stresses the importance of increasing our commitment to a Torah life, it is because that is what is best for us. We need to understand that Hashem, like a caring father, wants us to choose that which is best.

The specific *mitzvah* of *u'vacharta ba'chaim* teaches us that if we don't live with this nuanced perspective, we are missing an integral part of our *avodah*, our Divine service.

BUILDING ON TODAY

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"See, I have placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life..." (30:15-19)

What does the Torah mean when it says "today"? This choice was given to us when we accepted the Torah forty years earlier. Why does the Torah declare that the choice to observe the *mitzvos* was given to us "today"?

Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Darash Moshe*) explains that Torah is telling us that while the Torah may have been given to us many years ago, we have the opportunity to re-accept, re-affirm and re-energize ourselves in our observance and commitment to it on any given day.

Each and every day of our lives is a new opportunity to jump start ourselves and make amends. It is for this reason that the Torah uses the word "today."

We often get caught up in worrying about what will happen tomorrow instead of focusing on today. As the famous saying goes, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." Let us build one "today" upon the next so that we can accomplish great things.

REFLECTIVE RESPONSE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"See, I have placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life..." (30:15-19)

Mashal: A father and son are hiking in the mountains. Suddenly, the son falls on a rock, scrapes himself and calls out in pain, "Ahhh!" To his surprise, he hears a voice repeating, somewhere in the distance, "Ahhh!"

He pauses. Then, curious, he yells out, "Who's there?"

Immediately, he receives the response, "Who's there?"

Angered at the non-answer, he screams, "Coward!"

He receives the answer, "Coward!"

He looks to his father and asks, "Father, what is this?"

His father smiles and says, "My son, pay attention." And then he screams out to the mountain, "I admire you!"

Instantly, a voice answers, "I admire you!"

Again, the man screams, "You are the best!"

The same voice answers, "You are the best!"

The boy is surprised but does not understand. Then the father explains: "People call this an echo, but really this is life. It gives you back everything you say or do. Our life is simply a reflection of our actions. If you want more love in the world, create more love in your heart. Remember, son, your life is not a coincidence; it is a reflection of you!"

Nimshal: Two pathways are spread out before every person: "Life and Goodness" or "Death and Evil." Free will dictates that man can steer his destiny in any way he chooses. Moshe exhorts his beloved nation, *Klal Yisrael*, that there really is only one path to choose: Choose life, choose goodness, choose Torah as your guide to lead your life. If you choose a "life" of Torah, Hashem will grant you success in all your endeavors.

POWER TO CHOOSE

Rabbi Elya Brudny

"See, I have placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life..." (30:15-19)

We have the choice. *U'vacharta ba'chaim* - choose life. Every one of us is invested with the power to choose good from bad, right from wrong. We were given the choice at the start of the path, and now we have the choice to turn back and start again. If we have the choice, then it's our battle. Along with the choice comes the power.

It's very difficult, sometimes, but we must internalize that the ability to change is a reality: and this is the moment of truth. We might slip and stumble, but our job is to engage in battle and try.

CHOOSING GOOD

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"See, I placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life..." (30:15-19)

It is not always clear that good behavior leads to blessings and life and that bad behavior leads to curses and death. This allows us the free will to choose to be good. If it were always clear that good behavior leads to blessing and life, whereas bad behavior leads to the opposite, what choice could we have but to be good?

The very fact that being good does not always lead to goodness both forces us and enables us to base our relationship with G-d on a more profound basis.

For this reason, on a deeper level, G-d (through Moshe) is here asking us to be good for its own sake, rather than for any expectation of material reward, even when we do see clearly that being good leads to good results. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 28, p. 8a) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

THE CHOSEN PATH

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"See, I have placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life..." (30:15-19)

These verses come to warn the Jewish People that they have the freedom to choose how they live their lives. Ultimately, though, they should choose life - to serve Hashem.

One of the Rishonim, the Toras HaMinchah, notes that the verse should have said, "I will place before you" all of these options; when did Hashem "place" - in the past - life, goodness, death, and evil before them?

The Toras HaMinchah provides a fascinating answer. He explains that in truth, we were all given the choice between life and goodness, death and evil before we were born. For, our soul was permitted to decide precisely what our nature would be like, how we would live, and what opportunities we would be presented with throughout our lifetime.

For instance, a soul may choose to serve Hashem by having wealth in its lifetime: On the one hand, wealth offers the ability to spend time involved in Torah study and acts of kindness. On the other hand, it may lead to self-assurance and hinder a reliance on Hashem for success and security.

Or a soul may choose to be poor. While there is a risk that the difficulties of destitution would prevent a joyful relationship with Hashem, the ability to serve Hashem comes at a lower price, with even a small amount of *tzedakah* being significant or a small amount of learning becoming cherished by Hashem, for instance.

Incredibly, the Toras HaMinchah adds that the soul's ability to decide its nature not only applies to its physical wellbeing but also its spiritual disposition. Namely, will he have a drive for righteousness? Will he be easily inspired? If the soul chooses this option, he will indeed be more likely to serve Hashem throughout his lifetime.

On the other hand, since this is its natural disposition, the reward will not be that great - if he would stray from the path of Torah, his punishment would be much more severe. On the other hand, a soul who chooses to be born into circumstances that would naturally challenge its observance levels would not be punished so much if it did indeed succumb to its desires, whereas successfully overcoming the evil inclination would be a far greater display of honoring Hashem.

If we factor in previous reincarnations too, the soul's calculation becomes even more complicated. For example, perhaps a person misused his wealth in a previous existence, and therefore, in his future incarnation he may choose to be poor so as not to risk making the same mistakes, or maybe he would try again to be wealthy hoping that he would do better this time around.

Ultimately, though, every soul made an exacting calculation regarding what circumstances it could best bring honor to Hashem when it would come to the world. Accordingly, Hashem's instruction to the Jewish People to "choose life" served as a reminder to them that their souls had already chosen the best path to serve Him, and they should not abandon it now.

This incredible insight should provide us with so much encouragement. For, if we are facing challenges, we should know that we decided in the grand scheme of things that these challenges are the best way for us to serve Hashem. And where we are comfortable, we should know how much we are expected to push ourselves to achieve greatness. Whatever life we chose for ourselves, though, we have to now re-choose life - to serve Hashem in all circumstances to the best of our ability!

JOYFUL INFLUENCE

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

"I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life..." (30:19)

In an article published by the Jewish Observer in 1986, shortly after the passing of Rav Moshe Feinstein, Rabbi Nosson Scherman related:

A well-known Orthodox leader recalls that he was a young teenager the first time he saw and heard Reb Moshe. The *Rosh Yeshiva* was the guest speaker at a *siyum* in a small out-of-town *shul*. His *hadran* was beyond the young listener's comprehension, but one part of the address made an indelible impression. "People destroyed their children by always repeating, *"Es iz shver tzu zein a Yid* [It's hard to be a Jew]." No! It is not hard to be a Jew. It is beautiful and joyous to be a Jew.

Parashas Nitzavim ends with the plea, "Life and death I have presented before you, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live." At first glance, it seems that the end of the plea "so that you and your offspring will live" is superfluous. It was already established that Torah and *mitzvos* grant life, the opposite of death.

Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that the end of the verse can be interpreted differently: "So that you and your offspring will live" is not the *reason* to choose a path of life, a path of Torah and *mitzvos*. Rather, one is obligated to choose a path of Torah and *mitzvos*; however, that choice is not enough. That path must also ensure that your offspring will live in a similar fashion.

There are those who observe all aspects of the Torah, but there is no joy in their service. A child raised in a household without experiencing joyous Torah observance will almost certainly choose not to continue in that path. This is the meaning of the verse: choose a Torah lifestyle, which exudes joy. This conscious choice will certainly influence those around you to also engage and continue the Torah tradition.

DAILY DECISION

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

"See, I have placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life..." (30:15-19)

Why did Moshe stress that he was placing these choices before the people "today"? Perhaps this word's message is that each and every day of our lives, the same choices Moshe described stand before us to be confronted anew. Certainly someone whose behavior has been improper until now is obligated to choose the path of good for the future. But even someone who has already chosen that path and remained firmly on it may not rely on his past performance to guarantee that he will continue to do good, and must make his choice afresh "today" and every day, because every day the path of evil and death also stands before him. Every day, therefore he must once again consciously choose the good.

BE AN INSPIRATION

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

"I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring." (30:19)

Why do we need this verse to give us a reason for choosing the good? Does it not suffice to know that the result of choosing evil is death? Therefore we wish to say that this verse is intended to tell us what kind of good we are to choose; namely, a good that is powerful enough to leave a lasting impression on our children and students and make them also want to choose the good.

The Torah needed a special verse to convey this lesson because certain people, even though they themselves keep the Torah, do so in a way that discourages others from following in their footsteps. For example, some people give the impression that they do *mitzvos* only because they are required to, since they do, after all, believe that Hashem created the world and commanded the Torah. They seem to take no pleasure in the *mitzvos* they do and act as if they would prefer to devote their time and energies to more mundane pursuits. Their lives seem like an unending series of challenges which they must struggle continually to overcome.

Someone who keeps the Torah in such a fashion can only give his children the clear message that Torah is a heavy burden and the best we can hope for is to endure it. The children of such people are likely to feel that they lack their father's will power and to think there is no point in even making an effort to keep the Torah. Obviously, this is not the ideal. Instead, Hashem wants us to study Torah and do *mitzvos* with joy and enthusiasm, as if our entire satisfaction in life comes from them rather than from the illusory pleasures with which the material world tries to exempt us. We must show our children through our behavior that the follies of the world are worthless compared to the eternal life of the World to Come, which can be attained only through Torah and *mitzvos*, and that it is worth giving up all the pleasures of this world just for the sake of any one of the *mitzvos*.

This, then, is the true meaning of the Torah's injunction, "Choose life!" We are to choose to live a life of Torah and *mitzvos* with such relish and enthusiasm that our children and everyone around us will want to follow our example.

CLINGING TO HASHEM

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"To love Hashem, your G-d, to obey Him and to cleave to Him..." (30:20)

Toiling in Torah is the means to cleave and to attach oneself to Hashem. The Zohar (Acharei Mos) tells us: "The Holy One blessed be He, Torah and Yisrael are all one." This feeling of closeness and attachment to Hashem is a manifestation of true *ahavas Hashem*. Not only does a Torah scholar who is totally immersed in Torah feel attached to Hashem, he is living testimony of Hashem's existence.

Rav Baruch Ber Leibowitz zt'l, the *rosh yeshivah* of Kamenitz, traveled to the United States in the late 1920's to collect desperately needed funds for his yeshivah. During his stay in New York, Mayor Jimmy Walker presented him with the key to the city of New York. At the presentation, Mayor Walker remarked, "Rabbi Leibowitz disproves Darwin's theory of evolution. A holy person like him could only be created by G-d." Even the mayor was able to perceive the holiness and sanctity emanating from a righteous man who was totally engrossed in Torah and *avodas Hashem*.

ENHANCING LIFE

Rebbe Nachman

"To love Hashem, your G-d, to obey Him and to cleave to Him; for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land..." (30:20)

If someone separates himself from the Torah, it is as if he separates from life itself. (Zohar I, 92a)

Ki Hu Chayekha (for He is your life) can also be translated as "for it is your life." A person's life force comes principally from the Torah. Thus, the more one devotes himself to the Torah by studying and observing it, the more his life is enhanced. (See Likutey Moharan II, 78:2)

INCREASING VITALITY

Reb Noson of Breslov

"To love Hashem, your G-d, to obey Him and to cleave to Him; for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land..." (30:20)

Serving G-d is "your life." It gives you the vitality you need to get through each day. It is truly your lifeline, especially when you renew yourself and your attitude daily. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 63a)

Every soul is rooted in the Torah, from whence it receives its life and vitality. The more a person is attached to the Torah, the greater degree of vitality he brings into his life and days. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 462)

LIVING WITH LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"To love Hashem, your G-d, to obey Him and to cleave to Him; for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land..." (30:20)

Realizing that "He is your life," i.e., that G-d is the force within us that keeps us alive and gives us our zest for living, leads us to love Him. This love replaces the self-love that constitutes our inborn motivation to keep living and improving our lives.

But beyond this, the Torah is telling us here that it is possible for us to love G-d so much that this love becomes our very life, that we live off this love. Loving G-d enables us to cling to Him constantly, and clinging to Him constantly infuses our lives with infinite vitality and purpose. (Sefer HaMa'amarim 5714-5715-5716, p. 148) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

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