

PARASHAT NITZAVIM ∞ ROSH HASHANAH

PARASHAT NITZAVIM

מדוע קוראים פרשת נצבים לפני ראש השנה

כתוב בפסוק (כט:ט) "אתם נצבים היום כולכם לפני ה' אלקיכם". זאת אומרת שכלל ישראל עומדים יחד לפני ה'. השם משמואל מפרש שמטעם זה תמיד קוראים פרשת נצבים לפני ראש השנה, כי ראש השנה היא התרכזות הכלל, כמו שאמרו חכמינו ז"ל "אמרו לפני מלכות כדי שתמליכוני עליכם", ונאמר "ויהי בשורון מלך בהתאסף ראשי עם יחד שבטי ישראל. וזהו זירוז לכל אדם מישראל שיכוון לבו להיות משולב בכלל ישראל, וזהו "אתם נצבים היום".

Being an Integral Part of Am Yisroel

The Pasuk at the beginning of Parashat Nitzavim states (29:9): "You are all standing today before Hashem, the heads of your tribes, your elders, your officers – all men of Yisroel (כל איש) ישראל." On the last day of his life, Moshe gathered all members of Am Yisroel, and initiated them for the last time in the treaty of Hashem. The question is asked why does it say all men of Yisroel? It already stated "You are all etc."? The answer is that there is the general population of Am Yisroel, and there is each and every Jew in particular. Every person should understand that he is important; he is an integral part of Am Yisroel. He is an "איש". The word "איש" means someone important: someone who counts and brings something to the table. The Torah is telling us that everyone is special.

Just Stand Still

The Pasuk at the beginning of Parashat Nitzavim states (29:9): "You are all standing here today". Commentators explain that the word "stand" in this instance is not referring to the act of standing on one's feet, but rather to the concept of standing still. The Torah is teaching us an invaluable lesson for life. For most people daily life is very busy, and they rarely have any time to think about what they are doing. Rather they get stuck in their way of doing things. However if we want to be successful in our service of Hashem, make sure we have time to "stand still" and think, because only then will we be able to properly assess our actions, and properly change the ones that need changing. This is especially appropriate for this time of year. During the days of Chodesh Elul, Rosh Hashanah, Aseret Yemei Teshuvah, and Yom Kippur Hashem gives us the opportunity to stop and think and become better people.

Getting Used To The Wrong Things

In Parashat Nitzavim (29:15-16) the Torah says, "For you know how you lived in the land of Egypt and how you traversed the nations whose countries you have passed through. You have seen their abominations and their detestable idols (es shikutzeihem v'es giluleihem) of wood and stone, of silver and gold that were with them." The Torah refers to the idols of the nations in a most derogatory fashion. The word "sheketz" means disgusting. The root of the word "giluleihem" is "galal," the word describing human waste.

The Brisker Rav points out that the above cited Pasukim first refer to the idols of the nations in the most disrespectful of terms – et shikutzeihem v'et giluleihem – but then describe them in terms of raw materials – wood and stone (etz v'even), silver and gold (kesef v'zahav). Etz v'even does not sound so bad, Kesef v'zahav even sound attractive. Which is it? Are the idols sheketz and galal or are they kesef and zahav? The Brisker Rav explained that this Pasuk is teaching us that when a person first sees something disgusting, his immediate and natural reaction is one of revulsion. "This is nothing short of disgusting." But human tendency is that after a person sees it for a while and gets used to it, it does not seem as disgusting anymore. It is then perceived in quite neutral terms – like wood and stone. Ultimately, if a person continues to see it and becomes even more accustomed to it, the very thing the person originally considered revolting and abominable will be considered like silver and gold. What an important point to keep in mind in our daily service of Hashem, the danger of getting used to the wrong things. (Rabbi Frand)

It's Within Our Reach

Parashat Nitzavim includes one of the most beautiful Pesukim in the Torah [30:11-14]: "For this mitzvah that I am prescribing to you today is not too wondrous for you, it is not too distant. It is not in Heaven that you should say 'Who shall go up to Heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it?' It is not over the sea so that you should say 'Who will cross the sea and get it for us, so that we will be able to hear it and keep it?' It is something that is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can keep it." There is a difference of opinion among the early commentators as to which Mitzvah the Torah is referring to in this Pasuk. According to the Ramban, the Torah is referring to the mitzvah of Teshuvah [Repentance, Returning to G-d]. The Pasuk is letting us know that Teshuvah is a Commandment that is "within our capacity and within our reach to fulfill". We cannot wait for others to do Teshuvah for us, and we cannot blame others for our failure to do Teshuvah. There are no excuses! The ability to do Teshuvah is within our own mouths and hearts. As we approach Rosh Hashanah when we will renew our commitment to Hashem, may we all internalize the message of the above Pesukim and realize that no matter what hurdles there might be, the ability to succeed lies within each and every one of us.

ROSH HASHANAH

שברון לבי הוא שיעמוד לי ביום הדין

בערב ראש השנה הרבי רבי אלימלך מליז'נסק היה יושב ודואג ומתאנח ואומר "איך אבוא לפני הקב"ה ביום הדין, הלא עבירות הרבה עברתי". והיה חושב ומונה העבירות שהוא עשה. בסוף אמר "אם כן שברון לבי הוא שיעמוד לי ביום הדין! (ספר עיטורי תורה)

Soul Searching

Around three years ago my three year old son broke his arm. We rushed to Columbia Hospital in Manhattan where the doctors took him into a room sedated him and began to realign the

bones in his arm and place it in a cast. The doctor had promised us that he would be sedated and wouldn't feel any pain. Therefore we were very surprised when as soon as the doctor started moving his arm our son let out a loud shriek. My wife and I felt terrible that our son had gone through so much pain. Afterwards we asked the doctor about it, and he explained that our son was in a certain state of consciousness where although the body feels the pain and reacts to it, he will have no memory of the pain.

This got me thinking. The Pasuk states (Eichah 3:40): "Let us search and examine our ways and return to Hashem". Perhaps the Pasuk is alluding to this state of consciousness. At times on the surface we may be so stuck in our ways that we fail to realize our own faults. We are in that same state of consciousness that my son was in. We fail to realize how much spiritual pain we are in. But in truth we are crying out, our Neshamah is crying out! So what do we need to do to feel the spiritual pain we are in? We need to "search and examine our ways". If we do that, then we will be able to reconnect with our soul, realize what needs to be fixed, "and return to Hashem". Deep down we all know what we need to improve in; just sometimes we need to do some soul searching. We need to remove the outer layer in order to reach the inner layer. What an important message to take with us as we head into Rosh Hashanah, a time when we work on rekindling our relationship with Hashem. What better way to do that than by doing some good old soul searching.

Crowning Our King

There is a common misunderstanding about the Yom Tov of Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah literally means "the beginning of the year". Because of this people tend to think that on Rosh Hashanah we are merely celebrating the Jewish New Year. However, in truth on Rosh Hashanah we celebrate much more than that.

The following story helps us understand what Rosh Hashanah is all about. It's about a man named Yaakov and it takes place in the famous Nazi concentration camp, Auschwitz. Yaakov was a person who even among all the horrors still managed to keep his faith in Hashem, and prayed three times a day. One day at around 12:45 in the afternoon Yaakov's friend Moshe noticed that Yaakov seemed to be praying. Moshe was confused; Yaakov had already prayed the morning prayers and it was too early for afternoon Prayers, what can he possibly be doing now? Moshe couldn't contain his curiosity and asked Yaakov "Are you praying?" "Yes" Yaakov answered. "What, Why!? You already prayed the morning prayers and it's too early for the afternoon prayers, what are you praying?" "I am praying a private prayer to Hashem". "What can you possibly be praying for now?" "I am thanking Hashem". "It's crazy enough that even with all this horror you still pray three times a day, but to pray an extra prayer this is outrageous, your whole family was killed by the Nazi's, what can you possibly be thanking Him for?" "I am thanking Hashem for not making me one of them"!

This is exactly what Rosh Hashanah is all about, each year we designate a special day when we take a break from our busy lives to thank Hashem for giving us the opportunity and privilege to be Jews. On Rosh Hashanah Jews from all over the world get together to crown Hashem as our king, and to announce that we are proud to be a part of His army.

As we say in the Tefillah of Musaf [recited on Rosh Hashanah] in the section of Malchiyot (kingship) "It is our duty to praise the master of all....for he has not made us like the nations of the lands....for they bow to vanity and emptiness....but we bow to Hashem....."

By proclaiming Hashem as our king we are acknowledging that we are required to serve him and that leads us into the days of repentance (Aseret Yimei Teshuvah) and Yom Kippur (the day of atonement) where we beg for forgiveness if we have not served Him well.

The Commitment to Change

The Pri Megadim, (Pticha part 3:10), writes an important and encouraging principle of the Teshuvah process based on the Gemara in Mesechet Kidushin (49b.) The Gemara gives a scenario of a person who proposes to a woman on the condition that he is a tzadik - righteous person - and then gives her a ring. If she accepts the ring she is married even if he is a rashah gamur - totally wicked person - because he may have done teshuva. The obvious question that arises is how can a rashah gamur do teshuvah for all of his aveirot in the seconds that it takes for a woman to agree to marry until he gives the ring? Additionally, since teshuvah for each aveirah requires regret, confession, and acceptance (charatah, viduy and kabalah) it seems an impossible task for a rashah gamur to accomplish this task in such a short amount of time. The Pri Megadim explains that when a person accepts upon himself to do teshuvah and abandon his sinful ways, he is no longer considered a rashah. It doesn't mean that he is atoned for his sins. He must still do teshuvah, but in the eyes of Hashem he is no longer judged as a rashah. The Pri Megadim is teaching us that once we make the commitment to be better, we are seen differently in the eyes of Hashem, and then we can start our gradual process to perfection.

Losing a Battle Does Not Mean That you've Lost The War

As we get ready for Rosh Hashanah let me share with you a story which will hopefully provide us with some inspiration.

Rosh Hashanah had arrived, and Mayer, a 17-year-old student of Rav Shimshon Pincus, was disappointed. Rav Pincus' inspiring Torah lectures had made a distinct impression on Mayer to understand what the awe of the High Holy Days meant resulting in making commitments and resolutions to improve in his yirat shamayim, praying and learning. However, although he worked very hard to keep these commitments and resolutions, he failed to put them into action and felt that he had not progressed sufficiently for the upcoming Day of Judgment. As a result, he felt like a complete failure.

On Rosh Hashanah morning, Rav Pincus stepped outside the Shul for a moment and spotted Mayer in the corner of the hallway sitting on a low chair with his head between his knees. Rav Pincus, with his warm and caring personality, approached Mayer and placed his hand on his shoulder asking him why he seemed so down.

Mayer looked up into his Rabbi's eyes and poured out his frustration. He told him how hard he had tried during this past month to improve but had no success. He had pledged that this Rosh

Hashanah would be different but it wasn't. Mayer cried bitterly and hung his head in shame perceiving himself as a total failure.

Rav Pincus sat down next to the boy and related the following incident:

"During the Yom Kippur War, I was sitting in the Emergency Room in the Shaarei Tzedek hospital waiting for one of my children to be seen by a doctor for a cut that apparently needed stitches, when I noticed a commotion taking place. Many doctors had converged in front of the Emergency Room doors and appeared to be discussing an important matter.

"I inquired as to what was the cause of the commotion and I was told a soldier had been shot and had been brought to the hospital. The bullet was lodged in his leg and needed to be taken out. After the doctor had removed the bullet he notified the soldier, who had been awake during the entire procedure that the surgery was complete and he was free to go home. The young man, no older than nineteen years, painfully struggled to slide off the operating table. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and he looked curiously at the doctor.

Home? You think I'm heading home? True, I was shot and lost this battle, but there's a war raging out there and my fellow soldiers need me back on the battlefield.' The brave young man hobbled out of the room and headed back toward the front lines."

As Rav Pincus concluded this story he looked into Mayer's eyes and said, "Mayer, I'm not going to convince you that you have not stumbled. But just because you've fallen does not mean you can't get back up. Losing a battle does not mean that you've lost the war. We're fighting a war in there and I don't want to head back into shul without you. We need you to fight alongside the rest of us!"

A shy smile formed on Mayer's face and he thanked his Rabbi for the warm words of encouragement. Rav Pincus placed his arm around Mayer's shoulder and together they walked back into shul to "fight" alongside one another.

As we head into the High Holy Days let us always remember this important message, even if we feel that we have not been successful, nevertheless we need to keep on fighting.