

# PARSHAS NITZAVIM

תשע"ח

This parsha contains a deep idea at its very opening words. Moshe first addresses all the leaders and authority figures in Klal Yisroel. He then addresses kol ish Yisroel. Many meforshim cite the midrash which explains one might think Moshe is only addressing the public leaders of Klal Yisroel, who are uniquely suited to represent the people before Hashem. Hashem pays more attention to them. But this is a mistake. Every individual Jew is unique and has his own avodah to contribute which Hashem wants. Hashem looks at each and every one of us the same way and makes a bris with each and every one of us.

There are two types of bris Hashem makes with us—one is a bris with each individual and one is with the nation as a whole. We are His people and represent Hashem in this world, due to our special relationship He has with us. The relationship has two levels—one with the individual—and each individual has his own unique bris with Hashem—and one with the klal.

Chazal say the bris here in Arvos Moav has an extra dimension: The dimension of arvus. My individual bris with Hashem means I'm responsible for my own mitzvos and aveiros. But it doesn't stop there.

There is a popular idea that each person lives his own life and you have no business telling other people what they should do or not do. But in this parsha we find that we also entered a bris as a klal which makes each Jew responsible for the mitzvos and aveiros of every other Jew. This has practical ramifications in halacha. I have two mitzvos of shofar. One for my own obligation and one to see to it that everyone fulfills their obligation. I can do the same mitzvah over and over again for other Jews as long as there is someone in Klal Yisroel who hasn't yet fulfilled his obligation.

Klal Yisroel is not just a group of individuals. We are a single corporate entity—we are one body, with mutual obligations to each other. It is both positive and negative. On the one hand, I can help you fulfil the mitzvos. On the other hand, if I was able to influence you to prevent you from doing an aveiroh and I looked the other way, I am implicated in that aveiroh. I am responsible to see that other Jews do not do aveiros.

There is an aveiroh of lifnei iver—not to cause another Jew to stumble and sin. But there is also a mitzvah of tochocho—not to stand by and allow Jews to do aveiros. If I neglect to give proper tochocho, I am a sinner. This is an essential part of every Jew's obligation.

When we say vidui, we say it in the plural. Even though I personally may not have stolen anyone's property, if there is someone in my community who committed theft because I didn't influence him as much as I should have, I have to say vidui for that. This is not a very popular idea in today's liberal society that everyone feels free to do as he pleases without interference.

We are all in the bris together. This is the very first idea of the parsha. It is very disquieting. It forces us to realize that we cannot be complacent with the low level of Klal Yisroel's fulfillment of the Torah. Yoshiyahu Hamelech heard the kollok of last week's parsha and declared that it is up to him to bring up the level of Klal Yisroel. Otherwise, he would be responsible for Klal Yisroel's aveiros. Different people in different situations have different levels of responsibility. Yoshiyahu was the king and he had responsibility for the entire nation who was under his influence. Everyone has some sphere of influence, and he has an obligation to make an impact.

We certainly need to worry about our own fulfillment of the Torah. We can't overlook our own obligations, for the sake of someone else. But I must never lose sight of my obligation to uplift the Jews in my surroundings.

A person cannot opt out of the bris. He can't say he isn't interested in this obligation. He is a part of Klal Yisroel and he simply has to keep the bris he made with Hashem. Hashem chose us and there is no way out.

Because there is arvus, one might have thought we are responsible for everything a person does in private as well—even what he is thinking in his own mind. The posuk says there is no responsibility for the things we don't know about. There are things which we have no clue about and have no awareness about, so I cannot take responsibility for them. But for the things I know about, I need to try and do what I can. And it doesn't matter if I'll actually be successful or not. Once I know about it I have to try to correct it.

There is a frightening gemara in Shabbos which I often have on my mind. It tells us that before the churbon habayis, Hashem initially instructed the angels of destruction to put a black tav on the forehead of the tsaddikim to spare them and a red tav on the forehead of the evil people to mark them for destruction. The middas hadin complained that the tsaddikim also deserve punishment because they saw what the reshaim were doing and did nothing. Hashem responded that He knows the reshaim were so evil that the tsaddikim couldn't influence them, so they cannot be blamed. The middas hadin answered back that just because Hashem knows that, it doesn't mean the tsaddikim themselves knew this. They should have at least cared enough to make the effort to try to influence the reshaim, but they did not. Hashem admits that the middas hadin is correct and He marked all the tsaddikim to destruction together with the reshaim.

We are all responsible for one another. But there is a hierarchy of priorities. You start with working on yourself and your family, then the next level is responsibility to help your neighbors and community and then outward to other communities.

We are not living for ourselves. We are part of a unit and we became responsible for everyone else with the bris at Arvos Moav. We have to look around and see who is within our sphere of influence and who we can influence. This is part of our cheshbon hanefesh on Rosh Hashono.

Then the parsha describes the future pattern of Jewish history. We have three stages of geuloh. People have a deep misunderstanding of what geuloh is about. Either they think it will just happen by itself magically, or they think we have to bring it forcefully with political and military power. But the truth is that both attitudes are wrong.

We have to look at Jewish history and see what brings bracha and what brings kloloh. The cycle of ups and downs in the sifrei nevi'im are clear. We have to be brutally honest and take inventory at every taanis tzibbur to try to figure out why we are in golus.

The posuk says geuloh depends on our level of ruchniyus alone. The Rambam writes that we first need to return to Hashem in order to bring Moshiach. When we deserve it, it will come and if we do not deserve it, it will not come until we are forced to do teshuvah.

The Ramban explains: the posuk tells us to contemplate the golus and try to explain why it endures as long as it has. Look at Jewish history and realize why we are still in golus. Once we discover the roots of

golus, we need to do teshuvah in order to end it. The Rambam writes that geuloh only happens through teshuvah.

The lessons of Jewish history have to be internalized to the point where we realize that the only way to end the golus is to do teshuvah. It is not an on-off switch. It doesn't depend on marching and asserting sovereignty on Har Habayis. Only people with a limited understanding of Torah think this way. The geuloh happens in stages.

The pesukim predict that in the future, Klal Yisroel in golus will begin to gather in Eretz Yisroel and will have an initial awakening and realization. This cheshbon hanefesh spurs us to do teshuvah, and then Hashem responds by removing the orlas halev.

If we open up our eyes, we can perceive how Hashem runs the world and how Hashem's ultimate plan unfolds in history. But we have a block – an orlas halev. Over the long years in golus living among the goyim, we pick up their approach to life and develop a deep involvement with material pursuits. We have become insensitive to kedushoh and Hashem's hands-on involvement in our lives. This is our orlas halev. So Hashem demands that we look through the veil of this world and see how history is moving towards geuloh.

The Rambam writes something very interesting. It is not enough to believe the geuloh will happen. We also have to yearn for it and await its arrival. Otherwise, if you are so enamored with your non-Jewish lifestyle and your wealth and are so comfortable in golus that you don't know why you want Moshiach to come, you are violating one of the fundamentals of Torah. Why? Because the point of geuloh is to be able to devote all of one's energies to live a life of kedushoh and build a Torah life on the highest level imaginable. If a person is so mired in his pursuit of wealth and luxury that he has no yearning to just leave it all behind so that he can pursue ruchniyus exclusively, then he doesn't know anything about what Torah is all about. Something is desperately missing.

So you first have to learn the lessons of Jewish history, and slowly start to sensitize yourself to hashgocho protis and see how Hashem runs history and runs your life in particular.

One of the predictions of the Chumash is that at one stage of geuloh we will start to "hear His voice". It doesn't say we will start to keep Shabbos or Kashrus and any mitzvos. What is this referring to?

The midrash on the first pesukim of Bereishis says not only is the Chumash describing creation, it also describes the various stages of golus to geuloh—going from one level of enslavement to foreign governments to the next. Modai, Bovel, Greece and finally Rome which is succeeded by Christianity. The final stage where the process of geuloh begins, starts with a ruach Elokim – which is the spirit of Moshiach – that hovers on the face of the water. Chazal explain that this is a surge of limud HaTorah before Moshiach. In order for Klal Yisroel to open up their eyes and start the process of deep cheshbon hanefesh to move towards teshuvah, there will be a flourishing of limud haTorah. Only then will Moshiach come and end the golus completely.

Then the parsha predicts we will do teshuvah with all our hearts and souls. The Netziv explains that this happens through limud haTorah. We go through a process of becoming more and more sensitive to Hashem.

Then we have an interesting posuk. There is one mitzvah which I am commanding you about today. It doesn't say which mitzvah. It is not far from you but rather very close.

According to Rashi, the posuk refers to the learning of Torah.

Limud HaTorah isn't easy. It is very demanding and requires serious effort. But the posuk says it is not beyond your grasp. Lo bashomayim hi. But the implication is that even if the Torah would be in shomayim

or over the ocean, we would have to go and get it. There is no way to exempt yourself from learning. You cannot let all the obstacles in life deter you. But Hashem did us a favor and brought it very close to us.

Every human being has the capacity to learn and understand Torah. But we have to remove the orlas halev. We have open up our hearts to receive it. Every Jew has an automatic connection to Torah which needs to be revealed and exposed. No-one can excuse himself by saying he isn't cut out for it by nature.

When the yeshiva first started, there was a talmid who claimed that he tried and couldn't succeed with his learning. He thought he should just give up. I brought him to Rav Shach to get his advice. The talmid repeated his claim over and over again that he tries to learn but it isn't working. Rav Shach responded that he simply doesn't believe him. The talmid thought Rav Shach didn't hear him. Rav Shach assured him that he heard, but simply didn't believe. Chazal declare that if you say you toiled and didn't succeed, don't believe him. The Torah is accessible to everyone. Hashem promises that if you open yourself up to Torah it would go in. This talmid is now a rosh yeshiva.

Even if it is hard for some people to learn Torah, we cannot hide behind excuses. We have to make the effort—to go to China if we have to, to the moon if we have to. We have to make a conscious decision to work at it and overcome the obstacles and problems that come our way.

The Rambam in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah says that everyone can understand the Torah—man, woman and child. Hashem gave us a Torah that is understandable to every Jew.

Then the posuk tells us there is a mitzvah of bechiroh. Why is it a mitzvah? Isn't it just a reality that everyone is born with free will? Rabbeinu Yonah explains that although everyone has the power of free will, most people just follow their upbringing or submit to various influences. They go with the flow. Not everyone has the strength of character to take his life into his own hands and decide what he will do with his life. So there is a mitzvah to take our lives in our hands and make ourselves into what we choose to be. There is no problem that we cannot overcome.

Someone recently came to me with a litany of excuses to justify why he can't learn and be frum. He was abused and teased and bullied—everything you can imagine that people claim would push someone off the derech. So he's basically asking me to concede that it's just too hard for him to be a normal frum Jew. I told him that he's asking me to deny one of the fundamentals of the Torah: that each Jew has free-will to choose to do the right thing. Even when it's hard. There are very few people in history whom Hashem removed their free-will. Pharaoh, Sichon, Nevuchadnezzar. Most people aren't in that category.

Rabbeinu Yonah says it is a mitzvah to put aside all the influences and impediments and see one's self as having free choice.

The posuk says the Torah is accessible to everyone. The Rambam explains that is a gift from Hashem. The main reward of olam habba comes from limud haTorah. If Chazal say that every Jew is inherently capable of getting a portion in olam habba, it means every Jew must be capable of understanding Torah! Otherwise, how is a Jew going to get into olam habba? But no-one said it has to be easy. There are obstacles and we have to overcome them.

Looking at the parsha we see a number of important themes.

There is the infinite value of the individual. Hashem is concerned with each and every one of us. It doesn't matter if we are simple or more prominent. We each have our own bris with Hashem as well as Klal Yisroel's bris.

We have a responsibility to each Jew to see to it that we keep the bris together because we are all indivisible parts of the Klal.

Then we have the idea of geuloh. It only comes about when we recognize the pattern of Jewish history which hopefully brings us to teshuvah.

We have to go through a process of geuloh which starts by cutting away the orlas halev—to get away from the influence of our deep, deep involvement in material pursuits. We need to sensitize ourselves to kedushoh and yearning for times of Moshiach where we'll be free to only pursue spiritual goals.

What makes that happen is limud haTorah.

Before the yehi ohr of the final geuloh, there is a ruach Elokim hovering over the face of the deep. What is this hovering? This is the Torah of talmidei Chachomim which inspires us to come closer to Hashem and reject the golus we have sunken into. It is a process of moving towards spiritual goals. We have the power to take our lives in our hands and overcome all the obstacles.

What is interesting is that all these themes of teshuvah and geuloh in the parsha are read right before Rosh Hashono. We are judged with the knowledge that each and every Jew has the obligation to influence other Jews, the power to choose the direction of his life, and maximize his inherent potential to learn and understand Torah. It is not on the moon. It is accessible to every Jew and we all have the responsibility to reach it.