

Shabbos Nachamu always falls on Parshas Voeschanan. It contains many yesodos of yiddishkeit and it is no coincidence that it is read after Tisha B'Av.

The haftarah is "Nachamu, Nachamu Ami." What is the meaning of the double-Nachamu? The Midrash says that there is first a nechomo of the elyonim and then a nechomo of the tachtonim. People often forget the message of the midrash.

What is the nechomo of elyonim?

Nechomo of Hashem means a change in direction, a change of hanhogo. When Hashem sees that Klal Yisroel have reached a certain level, and sees that they are fit to come close to, then Hashem changes His middoh from din to rachamim. Hashem expresses Himself and interacts with this world through various middos and hanhogos which change based on our behavior and our level. The last nevuoh received by Klal Yisroel in Sefer Malachi concludes with the phrase "shuvu elai ve'ashuvoh aleichem." Hashem responds to our actions.

So nechomo of the elyonim happens when we pick ourselves up and become ready for geuloh. Geuloh doesn't happen by itself – it has to be deserved. The gemara discusses whether the coming of Moshiach will happen by itself or only with teshuvoh. The Rambam paskens that it only comes with teshuvoh. The gemara then asks a frightening question: what if Klal Yisroel will keep failing to do teshuvoh? Will the geuloh never come? The answer is also frightening: if Klal Yisroel doesn't do teshuvoh on their own initiative, Hashem will arrange world events in a way to put the Jews in such danger that Klal Yisroel will have no choice but to turn to Hashem to be saved. Then they will do teshuvoh. The choice is ours – which way the geuloh will come, and how soon it will come.

The nechomo of the elyonim comes when Klal Yisroel takes the initiative and decides to come closer to Hashem on their own in order to bring Moshiach. People get so caught up in the dramatic historical and political issues of Jewish independence and sovereignty over Eretz Yisroel that they think the geuloh has already arrived. They forget the nechomo of elyonim has to come before the nechomo of the tachtonim.

The haftarah is preceded by a very complex Parshas Voeschanan. It starts with Hashem telling Moshe Rabbeinu that in no uncertain terms, he cannot enter Eretz Yisroel.

Hashem warns Klal Yisroel that they are receiving Eretz Yisroel as the place to fulfill all of the mitzvos of the Torah. The posuk in Tehillim says that Eretz Yisroel was taken from its previous inhabitants and given to us for a spiritual reason – not just because we needed a homeland – not because we needed a safe haven from Anti-Semitism. It was given to us as the optimal place to fulfill the mitzvos and become closer to Hashem and reach the highest levels.

The parsha discusses the commandment not to add and not to subtract from the mitzvos. There are two aspects to this issur. Hashem commanded us to construct and then use various objects necessary to do mitzvos – four strings in tzitzis, four parshiyos in tefillin, four species for arba minim, etc. We aren't given the license to add to these or to subtract from them based on our own ideas or emotions. We can't say we think it would be a better mitzvah if done a different way than how the Torah prescribes. Hashem gave us a Torah to be observed as is. We say 15 praises every shacharis after Kriyas Shema about how the Torah is the most enduring and beautiful – perfect for all generations. It cannot be improved or updated.

But this commandment also tells us that we cannot add or subtract from the 613 mitzvos that we were given. The Netziv asks a question: If we are talking to people who care about mitzvos and who believe in the Torah's authenticity and who are already committed to keeping Torah and

mitzvos, why do we need a separate command not to remove a mitzvah. Removing a mitzvah is essentially the same as not committing to keep the entire Torah. A decision to subtract the mitzvah of lulav is a violation of the command to take the lulav. Mitzvos make an absolute demand on us.

The Netziv answers that the purpose of mitzvos is to serve Hashem and get close to Him. A person can rationalize that he thinks he can serve Hashem better and become even closer to Him if he adds or subtracts a mitzvah. After all, some mitzvos interfere with my feelings of closeness to Hashem! These issurim come to tell us that all Jews are held to the same absolute standard of all 613 mitzvos – no matter how great or how spiritual you are. You cannot make the Torah fit to your personal feelings and temperament. Adjust yourself to the Torah instead.

Immediately afterwards, Moshe Rabbeinu refers to the fact that Hashem destroyed all who followed the avodo zoro of Baal Peor. What is the connection to baal tosfif?

The Torah commands us not to stray after our hearts and our eyes. There are a lot of attractive ideas and philosophies that people like to latch on to which the Torah rejects. There are a lot of taivos that people constantly run after which the Torah forbids. The two go hand-in-hand. Why do people come up with all these crazy ideas? It is only to justify their lifestyle of indulgence in z'nus which is against the Torah. People can find it very difficult to stand up to these powerful trends and movements to follow their passions and desires. What will give them strength to resist? The posuk then says Hashem assures that if Klal Yisroel stays on track and clings to Him closely and doesn't get distracted by all these temptations, they will live and thrive. Hashem will take care of them.

Klal Yisroel are right across the Yarden overlooking Eretz Yisroel. They have just conquered Sichon and Og and have amassed tremendous wealth. They lack nothing. They are about to complete a forty year mission! What happens to stop their progress? Bilaam realizes that no army can fight them and no curses can affect them. So he advises Bolok and Midian to send out 24,000 pretty girls to seduce Klal Yisroel and come up with a disgusting avodo zoro in order to justify it.

Never forget this lesson. The only thing that lasts in this world and is worth working for is being glued to Hashem. Unless you are glued to Hashem, all the nonsense and taivoh of the world will come to tempt you. If your connection with Hashem isn't as strong as glue, they will form a crack and then a wedge and eventually pull you away entirely.

Klal Yisroel have spent forty years in the midbor, learning Torah totally isolated from the rest of human society. Now Moshe is preparing them – you are about to enter Eretz Canaan and it will take some time before you finish conquering all the territory. You will be exposed to the decadent pagan culture of the Canaanim. This will be a very dangerous time since the period of isolation in the midbor is over. If you are not prepared, these cultures will take you by surprise and intrigue you. Maybe you will feel inadequate and you won't know how to deal with them. You need to take pride in your wisdom which comes from the Torah – it will impress the nations more than anything in their culture.

In Eastern Europe at the time of the Haskalah, Jews largely lived in ghettos – completely isolated from non-Jewish ideas and culture. Then suddenly the ghetto walls came down and the wider world came rushing in. They discovered philosophy, poetry, music and were fascinated by it all. The old ways of the ghettos were interfering with their integration into western civilization. It was an embarrassment because it seemed so backward and unmodern. It is easy to develop an inferiority complex. So the Torah commands us to take pride in our way of life. When you confront the nations of the world, be confident that the Torah and its mitzvos are so deep and so meaningful that if observed properly, it will be something that

the non-Jews will admire and respect. There is no need to be insecure or feel inferior to any nation. Our wisdom is greater than all of them.

A few years ago, I put a tremendous amount of effort in writing a book. As I wrote in the introduction, I had these ideas on my mind for decades but never felt the urgency to put aside so much time to write a book. I was busy teaching and molding talmidim, working on sugyos in Shas in all their depth and complexity with Rishonim and Acharonim and I didn't want to get sidetracked. But a few years ago, the frum world found themselves challenged and threatened by the various proclamations of modern science which contradict the Torah. People became so impressed by what so many scientists and so-called thinkers were saying, and people started to doubt the Torah and Chazal's wisdom. Something had to be done about it to show people that the wisdom of the Torah and of Chazal is the only wisdom that keeps going and going. It is eternal. It is much deeper than anything scientists have to say about the world with their limited tools. They have nothing new to offer us in terms of fundamentally understanding the world.

Really, the order of the pesukim here should have been different. It should have continued with what it started – praising the righteousness of chukim and mishpotim right after praising their impressive wisdom, and then mentioning the greatness of Klal Yisroel's closeness to Hashem. Why does the posuk interject the closeness of Klal Yisroel with Hashem in the middle? But Hashem decided in His infinite wisdom to order it in this way.

When Jews encounter different cultures and different values, how do we know that we have a better chochmah? Maybe there is something they have which is superior? So the posuk tells us that we have the closest relationship with Hashem. What is the message?

Look at the Rambam's abridged version of his Sefer Hamitzvos at the beginning of Mishneh Torah. He discusses the reason why we celebrate Purim. He quotes this posuk and explains that Hashem comes to save us whenever we daven sincerely. The Rashba was fighting the influences of Greek philosophy and the challenges of Christianity which were posing a serious threat to Jewish faith in Spain. But you look at the universities today and you wonder who is studying Greek philosophy today? Who cares about Greek ideas today? Now there are only gender studies, ethnic studies and philosophies about racism. The Christian religion was a tremendous power for centuries. Where has it gone?

Only one people and one Torah has survived for 3500 years. It is unbelievable. It survived avodot zoras of every age and multiple empires which tried to impose their philosophies on the Jews – either by influence or by force. Klal Yisroel as a people survived. Moreover, there is a promise we have from Hashem that Klal Yisroel will never forget the Torah. So when I sit down to learn a sugya, and I try to understand a machlokes tannoim, I sometimes reflect: when did these people live? 1800 years ago? We are still breaking our heads trying to figure out what they meant? It is amazing. Torah never stops. It never gets old. Klal Yisroel and limud haTorah keeps going.

So before you get impressed by the nations and what they have to say, take stock of the fact that Hashem is close to us and will always save us. Throughout all the problems, from Pharaoh to Nevuchadnezzar, to Homon, to Antiochus, to Titus, to Torquemada of the Spanish Inquisition, to Chmielniki, and Hitler. We've endured so much, but we just keep going. Hashem has made an eternal commitment to us that we will outlive them. The Torah will outlive any of their ideas. So whenever you get impressed with what the non-Jews have to offer, just be aware that it will eventually go out of style. Whenever they come up with something new, just realize

that in 200 years, it will be obsolete. No one will care. That comes first. Then we can talk about the wonderful system of chukim and mishpotim – halacha and a Torah lifestyle.

The Torah gives us a stable way of life which can weather all kinds of craziness and insanity that we see all around us today. We are witnessing the collapse of western culture right before our eyes. What is happening in the United States is a collapse of civil society on a similar scale to the collapse of post-WWI Germany – the height of western culture – which eventually brought Hitler to power. Liberal American culture is devolving into anarchy in Portland and Seattle and cities across America. These were the same wonderful liberal ideas which took over the academic world in the 60's and the 70's and is now being played out in the real world today. These ideas simply don't work.

Torah is the only thing that works and gives us a stable way of life. It may not be an easy lifestyle, it may come with challenges and hardships that we have to overcome. But it is emes veyatziv, etc. – true and enduring from generation to generation – for all generations. This is why the pesukim are in the order they are in.

So how are we going to bring about a nechomo for the elyonim and tachtonim? Klal Yisroel in golus will be exposed to every piece of nonsense that exists – every taivoh that drives everyone insane. Who survives? Only those who cling to Hashem with all their might. They survive. The Jews that don't – those who get tempted and get swayed – will just fade away. Don't change anything from the Torah. It is an incredibly wise system of stable living. You might be impressed and be overwhelmed by the other wisdoms. But before you even look at these other philosophies, just look at our track record. The Jewish people have survived everything – the most horrible persecutions and mass murders. But more than that, Torah has survived, limud haTorah survives. It is the only thing that stands the test of time.

The midrash tells us about the ultimate nechomo – which comes after all the goluyos have subjugated us. Bavel, Poras, Yovon and finally Edom. Yaakov saw in his dream that the maloch of Edom was going up and up on the ladder and was not coming down! Hashem assured Yaakov that Edom will eventually come down. We see this happening in our lifetime – the collapse of western culture of Edom and Christianity right in front of us. After all of this happens, the Midrash says that limud haTorah, which is the mayim mentioned in Bereishis, will finally cause the ruach of Moshiach to blow.

When a person wants to keep his balance in this insane, crazy world we live in, the only way to do it is with limud haTorah. This is what the midrash says produces the conditions for moshiach to come. It isn't the ones who try to bring a goat on Har Habayis or those who claim they just discovered techeiles for the bigdei kehunoh. It is from those who toil in a sugya – a Rebbi Akiva Eiger, a Ketzos, Nesivos, a Reb Chaim, an Ohr Someach. This is the mayim which will bring the ruach of Moshiach and the geuloh sheleimoh. It is the mass amount of limud haTorah which we are doing even through the most difficult of times. Im yirtzeh Hashem, the nechomo of the elyonim will come through our ongoing limud haTorah.

At the end of a very difficult zman, we were nevertheless zocheh to have almost the entire yeshiva keep up in learning b'iyun till Rosh Chodesh and some beyond. It meant a lot to succeed in keeping the yeshiva going throughout this zman. No other yeshiva has been learning to this degree. It is this type of learning in difficult times – when Hashem puts us to the test to see how much Torah means to us – which is capable of bringing us significantly closer to the time when the light of Moshiach will shine.