

This week we read Parshas Ki Savo and next week is Parshas Nitzovim. After that, we have Parshas Vayelech. Why these parshiyos at this time of year? The gemara says we must read the brochos and k'lolos of Mishneh Torah before Rosh Hashonoh. What is the point? The gemara gives an interesting answer – the year with its curses will come to an end and the new year should start with only blessings. In previous years I gave a different answer to this question, and this year I want to explain how the gemara's answer is basically along the lines of the answers I have been giving.

The gemara's answer to this question – on the surface – is very puzzling. Will all the curses and bad things suddenly stop happening once we read the k'lolos of these parshiyos at the end of the year? Didn't we see that last year we read these parshiyos and we nevertheless experienced a difficult year with many tragedies and major disasters? What are Chazal trying to tell us?

Chazal are telling us that we are approaching the Yom HaDin, and our mindset has to adjust accordingly. Everything we do in this world has serious consequences. Unlike what all the liberals prefer to believe, the world is not yet in a state of utopia. We live in a very harsh reality of middas hadin – there is no such thing as a free ride. When the Yom HaDin approaches, we need to confront the consequences of everything we have done throughout the year. If we take to heart the concept of the Yom HaDin before Rosh Hashonoh, then the k'lolos will end. But if we don't take it seriously, the k'lolos don't end and the blessings don't begin.

Some people just breeze by life thinking it is just for our enjoyment. Like a little child who doesn't understand consequences. Maturity means taking a look at what you are doing and seeing the consequences that lie ahead – avoiding negative ones and trying to achieve positive ones.

The very beginning of Parshas Ki Savo discusses two important mitzvos. It describes a Jew's whole orientation towards life and towards Hashem. The description of the mitzvah of bikkurim explains that we only have a right to this land because Hashem gave it to us. This is the first Rashi in Bereishis. Hashem created the entire world and decided to give this piece of land to us. It doesn't matter if the nations of the world approve or disapprove.

The mitzvah of bikkurim is vital. Because after working so hard on your field to get a good yield, one is tempted to take all the credit. Right away, the Torah says no. You have to realize that Hashem gave you this land and He helped the land be fertile and productive. We see an interesting mitzvah – you have to bring these very first fruits to Har Habayis. Why? Because 5782 years ago, Hashem took some dirt from that place and created Odom Horishon. We always have to go back to the place we began in order to maintain the proper perspective.

The Rambam in Perek 2 in Hilchos Beis Habechiroh says as follows:

ומסורת ביד הכל שהמקום שבנה בו דוד ושלמה המזבח בגורן ארונה הוא המקום שבנה בו אברהם המזבח ועקד עליו יצחק, והוא המקום שבנה בו נח כשיצא מן התיבה, והוא המזבח שהקריב עליו קין והבל, ובו הקריב אדם הראשון קרבן כשנברא ומשם נברא, אמרו חכמים אדם ממקום כפרתו נברא:

The place of the mizbeiach on Har Habayis is the same place as the akeidah, Noach's mizbeiach, Kayin and Hevel's mizbeiach, and Odom Horishon's mizbeiach. This is where Hashem took Odom Horishon and gave him a neshomo. This is where we get our kapporo. We go back there to confront Hashem and to confront our lowly origins to gain a

sense of humility.

We say to the Kohen that we went through a history of golus and geuloh. So although I have these fruits today, I appreciate that I only have the merit to these fruits because of the long history of the Jewish people that I am a part of. I am sitting on the land Hashem gave us as the product of 3500 years of Jewish history – all the way back to Avrohom Ovinu. I am recognizing everything that brought me to this point – from the creation of Odom Horishon to Avrohom Ovinu all the way down from there – I do not exist as an independent individual with no history.

But on the other hand, a Jew does create himself to a large extent. We learn in Parshas Re'eh that there are two separate kedushos every Jew has. There is a kedushoh we received from our fathers, and then every Jew takes this kedushoh we are born with and we make something of our own with it. Each one of us has a different chelek in Torah – after we understand where we came from and we go on to take it further. This is the next mitzvah of vidui maser.

Then Moshe speaks to the Jewish people on his last days on Earth. He tells Klal Yisroel that there is a unique connection between every Jew and Hashem. It exists on two levels – on the national level and on the personal level. But you don't get started without middos tovos, as we discussed last week. The posuk emphasizes 'lolechesh bidrochoh':

את ה' האמרת היום להיות לך לאלהים וללכת בדרכיו ולשמר חקיו ומצותיו ומשפטיו ולשמע בקלו: וה' האמירך היום להיות לו לעם סגלה כאשר דבר לך ולשמר כל מצותיו:

There is a sequence to this posuk – chukim, mitzvos and mishpotim.

A chok has no rationale other than I obey the command of Hashem without question. Yes, I have my own unique relationship with Him, but I do not put my own understanding in front of my keeping mitzvos. I appreciate who I am and Who Hashem is.

There are three modes of listening to Hashem. Mishpotim are obviously necessary – these mitzvos keep society functioning. But we don't begin there because first we have to accept Hashem's mitzvos just as they are – shatnez, bosor b'cholov – chukim. Then we have mitzvos that aren't as obvious as mishpotim, but once they were given, they have a logic that I can appreciate – Chometz and Matzoh, Pesach, Shabbos, etc. Once I understand what it means to obey Hashem in an absolute way, my attitude to mishpotim changes. Before, I would keep mishpotim just to make sure society doesn't fall apart. But I wouldn't be so exacting with every penny! If I have the opportunity, I would steal if knew no-one was watching! But now that I have a relationship with Hashem, even mishpotim go beyond mere social functioning. Hashem's word determines my life – even in private.

In return, Hashem promises that we will be Hashem's special treasured nation. Am Seguloh. Onkelos translates seguloh to mean we are beloved. But it is not automatic. The posuk says Hashem will give us the ability to keep His mitzvos. This is the Ramban's principle about bitochon. When a person is sincere and is absolutely determined in pursuing goals in avodas Hashem, Hashem will guarantee that he will be successful. This is where one can have bitochon. This guarantee does not exist in material matters – why should Hashem guarantee anyone's material success? That is not bitochon. But if I have an absolute commitment to spiritual goals, then Hashem will guarantee I will succeed.

But then as a result, we become a superior nation above all the nations in the world.

The Torah is telling us something fundamental. What makes Jews special? A superior military? More Nobel Prizes? No – that is if we measure success as a non-Jew. But when we keep the mitzvos and develop middos tovos, this will impress the nations of the world and they will look up to us as Hashem's holy nation.

It is a beautiful promise, but it sets a very high standard. If we don't go all the way to the top, we will drop down. There is no such thing as being mediocre. We have the potential to be the most superior nation and there is no room for compromise. There is brocho if we make it and there is kloloh if we don't.

We are coming to a Yom HaDin. It means what it says in this parsha – Hashem gave us tremendous potential for ruchniyus. If we are determined and we work hard at it, we will succeed and we will get all the brochos of olom hazeh. But the goal is not to be wealthy and prosperous. The goal is to be a holy nation and the whole world will see our special madreigoh in ruchniyus and tremble before us. We don't have to impress the nations with advanced technology and weaponry, etc. We won't need any of it. By being an am kodosh, the world will look at us differently and show us tremendous respect.

When Yaakov came to Shechem, the incident with Dina happened. Afterwards, Hashem told Yaakov to travel to Bes Kel. Before leaving Shechem, Yaakov told his family to get rid of all the avodo zoro from Shechem. But how did he know there was avodo zoro? Yaakov realized he had just come back from all his nisyonos of Eisov and Lovon – completely unscathed. Now he is attacked by Shechem? He deduced that in order for this tragedy with Dina to happen and for the non-Jews to act so brazenly against him, it must be because the shevotim lowered their level. The nations immediately respond to our level and treat us accordingly. Once the shevotim cleaned out this avodo zoro, there was fear of Yaakov upon all the nations once again. Once we act

in a superior manner, the nations around us treat us differently.

The parsha continues to describe all the horrible punishments of the tochocho – terrible persecutions and diseases, and above all, the fright and confusion from not knowing what the future will bring.

We read this before the Yom HaDin. If we take this lesson seriously, the curses can end and we will experience all the brochos. But if we don't take them seriously, the curses will continue. This is a constant theme over the next few parshiyos.

We have to understand Hashem gave us tremendous potential – and when we let that potential be wasted, there is kloloh. There is no declining the opportunity we are given for achieving greatness.

Some bochurim in yeshivah often think that life is about gaming the system in order to get away with doing the absolute minimum to get by. But the reality is that we need to maximize the chances we have to grow in Torah and yiras shomayim to the fullest extent possible. Even when we maximize our potential and we learn a great deal, we don't pat ourselves on the back and take the credit. The Mishna in Ovos tells us that this is why we were created so it is expected of us. It isn't extra credit.

Hashem created a tremendous universe with billions of stars and galaxies. There is just one small Planet Earth with just one small nation called Klal Yisroel among the billions of people living on this planet. Unfortunately within Klal Yisroel, there is only a small group of people who realize that the purpose of it all is to learn Torah. We, learning in yeshivah, have the tremendous merit of being at the center of the universe. We are the ones who keep the existence of the world going. We recognize that the goal is to become Hashem's special chosen nation.

As we approach the Yom HaDin, we have to appreciate exactly what this is all about.