

## PARSHAS VAESCHANAN 5777

This parsha is always read after Tisha B'Av. The haftarah of Parshas Vo'eschanan is therefore Nachamu nachamu ami. Chazal say there is a nechomo for the elyonim and a nechomo for the tachtonim. The nechomo in the upper sphere precedes the nechomo here on Earth. This is the mistake made by the nationalistic political movements in Israel who believe they can pre-empt the process of geuloh down here before it has been achieved up above. Chazal say it is just the opposite.

The end of the haftarah concluded with some very important concepts in Torah. "Who can compare to Me, says Kadosh." Not, "Says Hashem". Why? Because the concept of Hashem being kadosh means Hashem is beyond anything physical and beyond any limitation of the physical world.

"Lift your eyes and see who created all of this. The One who brings the multitudes in numbers and calls them each by name." There is a prohibition against counting Jews. A Jew cannot be reduced to a number. Every Jew is unique. Rashi in Parshas Shemos quotes this posuk. Jews are individuals who cannot be reduced to a mere number. But Hashem, on the other hand, is capable of doing two things simultaneously—He can count Klal Yisroel in numbers while not losing focus on each Jew's unique personality and individuality. No-one escapes Hashem's view and deep perception.

Hashem is telling Klal Yisroel that the nechomo above comes when the special nature of our people is recognized. We belong to a Being who is kadosh and beyond this world—not comparable to anything that exists in the universe. He created the entire world yet gives very specific attention and focus on each and every individual without exception.

The second Aliyah in this week's parsha begins with the exhortation to guard and do the mitzvos. Guarding means limud because one who doesn't learn has no capacity to fulfill the mitzvos. Why is learning Torah out of all the wisdoms in the world so important to Klal Yisroel? It is because this is our unique chochmo. Never get confused about what is our chochmo and what is not.

The Gemara in Shabbos says a person should learn those parts of the Torah that contain Kiddush HaChodesh. Why? The Machzor Vitri explains that for the nations of the world to see the great chochmo that lies internally in Torah can take great effort on their part. But if they see the wisdom of Torah in the area that they already respect and appreciate, it makes it much easier.

Rav Yeruchum Levovitz, the Mir mashgiach, was staying in a hotel in Switzerland. Staying in the room next door to him was a famous German professor of ethics. The professor was relating to Rav Yeruchum all the deep insights and philosophies of the German thinkers and Rav Yeruchum acknowledged their wisdom. But then he asked: "have you produced a Chofetz Chaim from all your philosophic ideas?" No, they did not. And of course, this was 15 years before the German people were

going to produce Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime!

In order to see the greatness of Torah, one should look at how the Torah transforms and uplifts a human being and makes us a superior people—not by just keeping the halachos. The Chofetz Chaim became who he was, not by simply mastering the laws of Loshon Horo and Bein Odom Lechaveiro. He learned those sugyos and lived those sugyos in Shas and Rishonim with every fiber of his being until it became part of him. This is the secret of "Ushemartem va'asisem". Learning Torah as a living thing leads to living the Torah. Once you learn Torah, all the halochos become alive to you and live and breathe it. Then people see that this is a superior way of living one's life. They may not understand the intricate details of why this is necessary and why that is necessary, but ultimately, the message comes through.

It says in the 6th perek of Pirkei Ovos, learning Torah Lishmo grants us many gifts and above all, it uplifts a person to a higher level. Torah has the capacity to change a person and make him a superior person. So even people outside the world of Torah will appreciate what the Torah can do to transform the human being. Klal Yisroel are told, if you learn Torah and it becomes a living thing to you, it becomes the highest wisdom you can engage in. Not only that, the world around you will see how special you are because you are learning Torah.

The unfortunate tendency in Klal Yisroel – and it has dogged us throughout our history – is that we have an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the culture and the wisdom of the non-Jewish nations. That is what ultimately led to the churbon haBayis. Klal Yisroel could not help themselves from being influenced by the pagan culture around them. To be the only monotheistic religion in the entire ancient world was a task that Klal Yisroel couldn't stand up to in the long term. Hashem is telling us that the One who chose you gave you a Torah and a way of life that is way beyond and way superior than any other nation. Klal Yisroel doesn't appreciate what they were given. Even the chukim which we don't understand have the ability to transform us and uplift us in the eyes of the nations.

Hashem tell us that the greatest nation, Klal Yisroel, is great because of our deep connection to Hashem through the Torah. Hashem is not some theoretical idea or theology. He is real and He is there for us when we need him. But we have to call out to Him. We are a different nation that works through different rules to navigate through life. We go to doctors when we are sick, but we realize that the healing only comes from Hashem. We do our hishtadlus and the rest is in His hands.

That intimate connection with Hashem goes into the next phrase. The Torah is not a compilation of isolated concepts and rituals. Everything is interconnected and works together to produce an entire outlook on life. Shabbos and Eiruvim and Pesachim are all interrelated. Anyone who learns Shas knows that it is one composite unit. It all works together to build up the

human being. We can't pick and choose among our favorite mitzvos and ideals and neglect the others and expect to grow. It all works together as a totality and that is the only time it changes a person. A human being only functions well when all his organs and limbs work together as a single unit. So too the Torah only works as an integrated unit. You may not see the connection between Noshim and Nezikin and Moed. But it all works together and it only functions the way it should to transform the human being when it works together.

The tragedy of Klal Yisroel is when they fail to understand these pesukim. The Novi says don't try to compare the Torah to anything else. They aren't comparable. You might think they have their belief systems, and rituals and insights into human nature, but the Rambam writes in Iggeres Teimon that anyone who tries to compare Torah to other religions is similar to one who compares a statue of a human being to a living human being. The similarities are only external. There is nothing inside other religions which is living and can animate it. It is stone. Torah is like a living human body—it is alive in its totality. Hashem is incomparable to everything and His Torah is incomparable to everything. Look up to the heavens and see all the vastness that Hashem created, yet He gave us a Torah and it is suited to be lived in a complete way by every single Jew.

Usually, on Shabbos Mincha, Monday and Thursday we read the first Aliya of the coming parsha until sheni. But this week we are in the process of churbon. We add those parts of the next Aliyah that talk about the singularity of our relationship with Hashem and the singularity of Torah.

Eichoh speaks over and over about being bitterly betrayed by the non-Jews on whom we relied. We put our trust and our security in the nations and we were abandoned in our time of need. The message is clear—stop looking to the non-Jewish world for security and self-worth. We have the Torah given to us by Hashem Himself containing the greatest wisdom in the world. It is a coordinated system that works together to transform us and bring us close to Hashem and He makes Himself available for all our needs. We don't have to look elsewhere for anything. If we remember that, there is no Tisha B'Av. When we forget that, we have Tisha B'Av.

Nachamu Ami tells us that the nechomo has to come to the elyonim first. The nations don't count. Their culture doesn't mean anything. We say every day in davening that all the strength and wisdom of human beings are like nothing compared to Hashem. They don't derive their strength and their chochmo from Hashem, so it is ultimately futile. That is what we have and it isn't futile. We don't have to feel second class to any other system of thought and behavior. Once we realize that and stop the inferiority complex, then we start the process of the nechomo of elyonim.

Chazal tell us that the churbon happened because of bittul Torah. Although we've discussed this before in all its complexity, there is still one simple idea we haven't explored. Chazal say, halevai that if a person would put his mind into havonas haTorah and see the infinite chochmoh that it contains, he would be compelled to return to Hashem. It is something so vast and deep that no human being can fathom and forces you to confront Hashem. That is why in the end of Eichoh we are told to rise up at night to learn Torah. If we want to get back to the level of Hashro'as HaShechinoh that we lost with the churbon it is by learning Torah deep into the night.

Tisha B'Av commemorates the tragedy of 3500 years of history as well as the tragedy of today. To understand the gadlus of Torah, the depth of the Torah and the chochmoh of Hashem,

if we take it as a total system and we learn it and live it and it becomes part of us it changes us and brings us closer to Hashem. That is the formula. If we remember that, we move towards geuloh. If we forget it and become just like every other nation of the world, we repeat the same mistake Klal Yisroel has made year after year and generation after generation. It happened in Spain, in Germany, and many places and cultures throughout our history. We assimilated and Hashem just gave up. Klal Yisroel forgot what it is they have and why it isn't comparable to anything the other nations possess. Once they understand our unique gift and mission in the world, there is nechomo in the elyonim which brings nechomo for the tachtonim.

This is the most important lesson in preparing for the final geuloh. People think the yeshuah is going to come from President Trump or his Jewish daughter and son-in-law. But the yeshuah is going to come from Hashem. And the more we appreciate the fact that we are part of a unique nation, the closer we get to the geuloh sheleimoh.