**Parsha Potpourri**

**Parshas Nitzavim / Vayeilech – Vol. 12, Issue 46**

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**ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות ואת הרע (30:15)**

At the end of Parshas Nitzavim, Moshe informs the Jewish people that he has placed before them life and good, and death and evil. In addition to the obvious difference between life and death, to which good and evil are likened, Rav Yitzchok Hutner explains that there is a more profound distinction between them. Life requires continuous sustenance, and a person who does not regularly eat and drink and constantly breathe will die. Death is different, in that once something has died, it will remain dead and nothing is needed to maintain its status.

With this distinction, Rav Hutner explains that we can now appreciate more deeply the comparison of life to good and death to evil. A person who chooses the path of Torah and mitzvos – the ultimate good – is spiritually alive, yet he can never let his guard down, for life requires continual nourishment and vigilance. In contrast, a wicked person who has fallen and spiritually died will remain in that state without any effort.

Rav Hutner adds that this dichotomy can help us answer a question raised by Rav Elchonon Wasserman. The Gemora in Kiddushin (40b) teaches that a person who performs a mitzvah and subsequently regrets it loses the merit he accrued for that mitzvah. If Hashem allows remorse to uproot prior good deeds, it naturally follows that sins that are regretted should also be erased, for Hashem’s attribute of giving reward is 500 times greater than His attribute that punishes. However, if a mere thought has the power to undo our past deeds, what is so unique about the concept of teshuvah (repentance) and why do we consider it such a valuable gift from Hashem?

According to Rav Hutner’s insight, we now understand that there is an important difference between the two cases. The Gemora says that if a person does a mitzvah but subsequently decides not to maintain it, it becomes lost and dies, for like life, good requires ongoing sustenance. Sin – spiritual death – is different, for once something has died, the laws of nature mandate that it stays eternally dead. Thus, even if a person attempts to stop sustaining spiritual death by regretting his transgression, it will still be dead. Accordingly, teshuvah for a sin is fundamentally unlike “teshuvah” for a mitzvah and indeed represents a tremendous gift from Hashem, in which He enables us to resurrect and rectify a misdeed that according to the laws of nature should remain irreparable and permanently dead.

Applying this concept to our own lives, Rav Yisroel Reisman explains that the lesson we derive from here is that spiritual achievements must be continuously nourished and maintained. If we find ourselves still working on areas on which we focused in previous years, rather than despair, we should recognize that life and spiritual good need ongoing sustenance. At the same time, once we have successfully implemented a positive change in our lives, we should never take it for granted, but must constantly stay vigilant to ensure that our accomplishments stay with us for years to come.

**ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדה את בני ישראל שימה בפיהם**

**למען תהיה לי השירה הזאת לעד (31:19)**

Parshas Vayeilech contains the last of the 613 commandments, the mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah. However, in instructing us to write a Torah scroll, the Torah uses an unusual expression, telling us, “Write this שירה for yourselves and teach it to the Children of Israel; place it in their mouths, so that this שירה shall be a witness for Me.” The word שירה means “song,” and although the Gemora (Sanhedrin 21b) interprets it as referring to a Sefer Torah, it is still an unusual and surprising descriptor for the Torah. Why does Hashem refer to the Torah as a song?

In his sefer Haksav V’hakabbalah, Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg writes that the word שיר is connected to the word ישר (straight). He explains that for music to sound pleasing to the ear, it is essential for the notes to be arranged in a precise order and be played in the proper sequence. If the notes in a song are not “straight,” the music will be transformed from a harmonious melody into cacophonous dissonance.

From this perspective, it becomes clear why the Torah refers to itself as a שירה, for it is described elsewhere (Yehoshua 10:13) as ספר הישר – the Book of yashrus. In the introduction to his commentary on the book of Genesis, the Netziv writes that Sefer Bereishis is particularly called ספר הישר, for it recounts the lives of the Avos (Patriarchs), who were all straight and upright. Although Avrohom’s contemporaries may not have known the details of his mitzvah observance, they all recognized that he was honest and sincere. This attribute is so fundamental that it encapsulates the essence of the entire Torah – ספר הישר – which requires us to be trustworthy and yashar.

Rav Yissocher Frand recounts two inspiring stories of contemporary Rabbis who embody the Torah’s yashrus. Rav Ahron Soloveitchik was the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Brisk in Chicago, but he also taught a weekly Gemora class at Yeshiva University after his brother, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, became ill, an arrangement which required Rav Ahron to travel regularly between the two cities. On one of his journeys, his mother-in-law, who lived in New York, wished to accompany him back to Chicago to visit her daughter. However, because she did not like to fly, they travelled by train.

When they arrived at the train station, Rav Ahron approached the ticket counter to buy two tickets, but the ticket agent informed him that there was a promotion that day that allowed spouses to travel for free, in which case he only needed to purchase one ticket. Rav Ahron responded that the woman accompanying him was his mother-in-law, not his wife, in which case he was not eligible for the offer and needed to buy two tickets. When the agent replied, “We don’t check marriage licenses here, so you only need one ticket,” the Rav insisted on speaking to a supervisor.

When the supervisor arrived and asked what the dispute was, Rav Ahron explained that the ticket agent was attempting to save him money by offering him a free ticket for which he did not qualify, since his traveling companion was not his spouse. The incredulous supervisor responded, “You’re old enough that you could be married to each other, and that’s good enough for me, so why are you making problems and wasting your money?” The determined Rav persisted, “She’s not my wife, and I refuse to take something to which I am not entitled. I insist on paying for her, so please sell me two full-price tickets.”

Rav Frand’s second story involves Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, who served for a time as the Rav of Congregation Toras Emes in Toronto. The members of his shul once presented him with a beautiful silver Kiddush cup in recognition of his devoted service to the community. Shortly thereafter, one of Rav Yaakov’s congregants was shocked to observe him entering a pawn shop with the Kiddush cup he had just received, seemingly attempting to sell the valuable gift that he had just received. The congregant informed the members of the synagogue what he had witnessed, and the president of the shul called the Rav to demand an explanation for his conduct. Rav Yaakov replied that he considered any gifts presented to him by the shul as part of his salary, and as such, he needed to include the Kiddush cup on his tax return, so he took it to the pawn shop to find out its value so that he could accurately report it on his taxes.

Rav Frand notes that unfortunately, we live in a generation in which the trait of yashrus often receives more lip service than actual implementation. Sadly, we have recently been inundated with stories of Orthodox Jews who, instead of following in the ways of Rav Ahron and Rav Yaakov, are accused of acting far from ישר. This is not the way of the Torah, which refers to itself as a שירה to teach us that being ישר is its essential defining feature.

The Smag writes (Mitzvas Asei 74) that we must be honest in our interactions with others, going above and beyond what the strict letter of the law requires, so that when Hashem sends Moshiach to redeem us, the nations of the world will acknowledge that He acted correctly, for the Jews are trustworthy people. However, if we are fraudulent and deceitful, they will question why Hashem would choose a nation of thieves and cheaters. Rav Frand points out that much of the Rosh Hashana liturgy revolves around asking Hashem to rule over the entire world and send Moshiach to redeem us. The Smag teaches us that there is a simple formula to get our request granted. If we follow the yashar ways of the Torah and the Avos and become people who are recognized around the world as honest and straight, Moshiach will be on his way, may it be speedily in our time.

**Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources which discuss them):**

1. Moshe told the people (30:12) that the Torah is not in Heaven. The Gemora in Bava Metzia (59b) understands this to mean that after the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, it is up to the Sages to decide matters of Jewish law, which are no longer within the jurisdiction of Hashem. In numerous places, the Gemora records episodes in which a bas kol – Heavenly voice – descends to inform the Sages with which opinion in a dispute Hashem sides. Why is it referred to as a bas kol – literally, the daughter of a sound – and not as a ben kol – the son of a sound – or simply as the sound itself? (Tosefos Sanhedrin 11a, Tosefos Yom Tov Yevamos 16:6)
2. The Gemora in Chagigah (3a) teaches that for the king’s reading of the book of Devorim (31:11), the men came to learn and the women came to listen. The Gemora questions why the Torah commands (31:12) that the small children be brought, and answers that it is to earn merits for their parents in bringing them. On a practical level, does this rationale apply to bringing small children to the synagogue? (Magen Avrohom 689:11, Mishnah Berurah 98:3 and 124:28)
3. Each year the reading of the entire Torah is finished on Simchas Torah. How is it possible for a complete Hebrew year to go by without any public reading of one of the 54 Torah portions?

**Answers to Points to Ponder:**

1) **Tosefos** writes that the voice which is heard is not the original voice which emanated from the heavens, but rather an echo which results from it. As a result, it is appropriate to refer to it as a bas kol, meaning an offspring which result from the initial voice. Alternatively, the **Tosefos Yom Tov** suggests that when the Jewish people were on a high enough spiritual level, Hashem communicated with us through prophecy which was specifically and directly addressed to an individual prophet. After this period ended, Hashem communicated with us through a lower form, in which a voice emanating from the heavens made His will known to whomever was present to hear it. Because this is a lesser level of prophecy, it is referred to as a derivative of the original voice. This also explains why it is called a bas kol and not a ben kol, as the feminine term connotes the fact that the level of prophecy has weakened.

2) The **Mishnah Berurah** rules that children who haven’t yet reached the age at which they are ready to understand the concepts of prayer and the holiness of a synagogue should not be brought there for several reasons. First, their childish behavior will disrupt others from praying properly, and it desecrates the inherent sanctity of the synagogue. Additionally, if they become accustomed to viewing the synagogue as a place to play games, they will be likely to continue to treat it this way even when they are older, as it is very difficult to uproot deeply-ingrained habits. Finally, he adds that parents need to check their clothing to make sure that it is clean of anything foul-smelling which could disqualify the prayers of those around them. On the other hand, when they do reach the age at which they can appreciate the holiness of the synagogue and of prayer, it is indeed a mitzvah to bring them and to teach them to sit with awe and fear and to answer Kaddish, Kedushah, and “Amen” where appropriate.

3) In a year such as this one, in which there is only one Shabbos between Rosh Hashana and Sukkos, Parshas Nitzavim and Vayeilech are read as a double parsha on the Shabbos before Rosh Hashana, and Parshas Haazinu is read on Shabbos Shuva. If there are two Shabbosim between Rosh Hashana and Sukkos, such as next year, Parshas Nitzavim is read before Rosh Hashana, Parshas Vayeilech is read on Shabbos Shuva, and Parshas Haazinu is read on the Shabbos between Yom Kippur and Sukkos. As a result, Parshas Vayeilech is now being read at the end of 5777 and will next be read at the beginning of 5779, and the entire year of 5778 will pass without it being read.

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