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Parshas Nitzavim - Vayelech

21st of Elul 5783

## The Bulletproof Jew

The people living in the times of the navi Yechezkel once approached him with the following question. With idolatry rampant, the Bais HaMikdash destroyed, and Judaism looking increasingly less glamorous, they wanted to know, were they to walk away from it all and assimilate into the world around them, would that make them non-Jewish? Did their Jewishness depend on their conscious decision to follow it, or was it ingrained in them whether they liked it or not?

They asked this question because they wanted out, but they wanted to know if walking away would absolve them from the obligation to keep the Torah. Would they still get punished for not shaking the lulav or for eating pork? Would their decision to leave rid them of all religious duties? (Yechezkel 20:32, according to the Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim 3.)

We all know the answer to their question. To us it seems simple. But is it really? In essence, they were asking Yechezkel a fundamental question about Judaism. Every other religion in the world is intellectually based. If one intellectually subscribes to that religion, then he is part of it. If one makes a conscious decision to break off, then he's not.

Is that true with Judaism? And if it isn't true, why not? These people reasoned with Yechezkel, saying: "When our ancestors stood at Har Sinai, they chose Judaism. We didn't. Why are we bound to a choice that they made? If our grandparents chose to become vegetarians, that wouldn't automatically make us vegetarians, so why should the choice my ancestors made to accept upon themselves the yoke of Torah be binding on us? They intellectually chose to accept it; why can't we intellectually reject it?"

## The Jews of Spain

The same question was posed by the Jews of Spain to the great fifteenth-century sage Rav Yitzchok Arama, the author of the Akeidas Yitzchok. These frightened Jews, faced with the horrific choice of converting to Christianity or dying, asked him if conversion to Christianity absolves them from their religious duties. "Our grandparents chose Judaism, but now, under our current conditions, we feel as though we must choose Christianity. Perhaps if they knew how hard it would turn out to be, they wouldn't have accepted Judaism on our behalf. Can we shed our Jewishness?"

The navi Yechezkel and Rav Yitzchok Arama turned to their respective communities and responded essentially the same way. Both pointed out the fundamental mistake that the people were making.

Our ancestors didn't choose Judaism and then forcefully bequeath it to us. It is not an intellectual concept that can be abandoned at will. One does not become non-Jewish if he sheds the philosophy of Judaism in order to get baptized or convert to Islam. We don't receive Judaism from our parents. Every single one of us stood at Har Sinai and willingly accepted the Torah and Hashem's Kingship. This wasn't an

intellectual acknowledgment; it was a transformation. The animalistic instincts bottled up inside of us, the grotesque beast lurking underneath our skin which we developed in Egypt was effectively eradicated by the blast of spirituality that we got on that mountain. We got an injection of holiness that instantly elevated us to become God's ambassadors on Earth.

It was not an intellectual idea. It was not conceptual. It was not a mental agreement. It was Hashem granting us the exclusive access to the elixir of life, the holy and sacred Torah, that literally went into our bloodstream. The human body is comprised of 248 limbs and 365 different ligaments and sinews. There are 248 positive mitzvos in the Torah and 365 negative ones. Is that a coincidence? Of course not. It is due to the fact that when we received the Torah, the 613 mitzvos became infused into every single one of the 613 parts of our body. It instantly raised us above humanity. It instantly charged us with a mission of cherishing that holiness and bringing it wherever our feet take us. Our very DNA became supercharged with Godliness.

Going into a Christian Baptist bath, aligning with the Islamic faith, or doing yoga with a bunch of Buddhists on a mountain in Nepal cannot surgically remove the holiness embedded inside of us. It cannot take away our Judaism, for Judaism is our essence. Our very cells are Jewish.

### **Holy Ramifications**

This holiness came with immediate ramifications. We no longer could act the same way others did. What was morally acceptable to others was no longer morally fit for us. Our holy bodies required different food to fuel it. Hence, a Jew is prohibited to eat certain foods, notwithstanding the fact that those foods don't seem to affect non-Jews at all. It's because our supremely holy bodies are physically supercharged with sanctity and must be treated as such.

This reality has proven itself over the course of human history. Millions of various religions have been tried by the world since its inception. Only Judaism has endured. For it is not an idea that can fly away with the intellectual winds of the times. It is not a religious trend that gets outdated or archaic. It is a physical force embedded in the body of a Jew, and it gets passed down to the next generation, whether or not that generation is even aware of its existence. The holiness is inherent. It is a spark of the Divine. Those sparks can sit dormant for a thousand years, but they will come to the surface at some point by a Jew who feels their cries and allows them to glow again.

Jews who know nothing about Judaism still seem to hang on to something. A Pesach seder. A Yom Kippur. A yahrtzeit candle. A yizkor. Even Jews who oppose Judaism. Jews who have been irreligious for centuries still have that spark inside of them, and sometimes — without even realizing it — they refuse to let that spark go.

### **The Russian Soldier**

There was once a frantic knock on the door of the Chofetz Chaim's home. The Chofetz Chaim opened it up to find a soldier in the Russian army. The Chofetz Chaim ushered him in and asked what he could do for him. The burly soldier sat down and began crying uncontrollably. The Chofetz Chaim, a bit surprised, asked the man what was wrong. The soldier looked into the Chofetz Chaim's eyes and told him the following:

"You may think I am a regular Russian soldier, but I'm not. I am really Yitzchok Yarkovsky, and I am a Jew. I was grabbed by the Russian army when I was five, and I haven't done a single Jewish thing since. Every day I think about Judaism. Every day I long to be back. Every day I feel something inside of me. But what can I do? The Russian army is a brutal place for any human to be in, let alone an innocent Jewish boy."

"Holy sage, I am going to have to go back to my camp in a few minutes. Can you give me some words of inspiration? What will become of my Jewishness? Am I still a Jew? What will become of my children?"

The Chofetz Chaim looked at the poor fellow and told him the following. He said, "Every Jew has a soul inside of him that permeates his very essence with holiness. No force, no ideology, no army, no union, and no

revolution can ever take that away from him. The Jewish soul is bulletproof. Walk with your head held high, knowing that every cell in your body is different. You may not know the intricacies of Judaism, but if you keep up the courage to tap into your soul's infinite holiness, its presence will be felt forever and it will one day be rekindled."

In this parshah, when Moshe told the Jewish people that they are all standing at the mountain, making a covenant with Hashem, he wasn't talking about a business deal in which one side could hire a really expensive lawyer to get rid of the agreement. He was talking about a metamorphosis of holiness. And he wasn't just talking to the people physically standing there, he was talking to every future soul in the Jewish people's galaxy. Har Sinai dispensed holiness into the souls of Jews for every time and for every era. From the holiest sage learning on a hilltop in Teveria to a soldier in the barracks of the Russian army.

### **Our Water Obsession**

The Jewish people seem to have a little obsession with water. We wake up in the morning and wash our hands. We walk into shul to daven and wash our hands. We go out of a bathroom and wash our hands. We sit down to eat bread and wash our hands. We sit down to eat anything dipped in a liquid and wash our hands (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 158:4). We touch our shoes or scratch our head and wash our hands (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 4:18). We run to immerse in a mikvah — some yearly, some monthly, some daily. What does pouring water over our hands accomplish? What does immersing in water do?

The Mishnah Berurah, in his second explanation to the halacha of netilas yadayim (158:1), writes that we wash our hands because we are charged with being holy. By pouring water over our hands, we internalize that idea.

Now, what does pouring water over our hands have to do with being holy? What does washing our hands after we scratch our heads or touch our shoes have to do with sanctity? It isn't merely for cleanliness, because we are obligated to wash our hands even if they aren't noticeably dirty. So why are we doing it?

The answer lies in the translation of the word netilas. The word "notel", according to Rav Hirsch, means "to raise." By pouring water over our hands, we signify to ourselves that we are different. We are higher. We are holier than the animalistic, lustful world we live in. We pour water on our hands because water is different. Water represents a place where the typical human can't be. It's a place where the ordinary human can't survive. And yet that's where we are. We live above humanity. We carve out a little island of holiness in this earthly tsunami we live in and forever make that our residence.

We walk around feeling the charge of kedushah we received at Har Sinai. We never tell ourselves that the Torah wasn't speaking to us. We don't say, "That was then and this is now!" Every single one of us were there. The holiness was given to us all. To the Jew in Granada in 1129, to the Jew in Tunisia in 1255, to the Jew in Turkey in 1584, to the Jew in Uzbekistan in 1834, to the Jew on the Lower East Side in 1919, and to the Jew reading this right now in Los Angeles, Toronto, Miami, and Baltimore. The Torah spoke to us all. It injected our cells with the perfect amount of kedushah to enable us to take on any challenge we face, no matter what time, no matter what place.

It's not an ideology we inherited; it's a physical force we were born with. It's that spark that enabled us to look away when our Spanish neighbors idolized bullfighting and the torture of animals. It's the spark that made us abhor the gladiator fights that the Roman society so immensely loved. It's the spark that keeps us morally sound in a Western world drowning in immorality. It's the spark that makes a Jew a Jew.

### **The FBI and the Mysterious German Submarine**

Towards the end of the Second World War, a mysterious German submarine crossed the Atlantic Ocean and shockingly made it all the way to American shores. It promptly opened its door, and

six shadowy spies got out of the submarine and ran inland. These six men were tasked with planting bombs at strategic locations throughout America in an effort to sabotage the American army in its war with Germany. Five of the men ran off without being seen. The last one was spotted while running on a nearby dock by a local fisherman, who raced to the police to report him. After describing roughly what the man looked like, the police forwarded the case to the FBI who began a frantic search to catch him.

My wife's great-grandfather, Siegfried (Shmuel) Hopfer, a German immigrant, was a big tzaddik and talmid chacham who was also a brilliant inventor and professor at the prestigious Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Despite having lived in America for years before the war broke out, he was nevertheless suspected by the FBI as being that last spy that ran off the submarine. They began tracking his every move, and one day after he left his house in Ithaca, the FBI broke in to investigate. What they found shocked them. They found something that shouldn't have been there. They found something that left them with the unequivocal conclusion that Shmuel Hopfer was, in fact, a German spy. In the bedroom, lying in plain sight, was none other than a shaitel.

"Now, who would possibly wear a wig but a spy trying to disguise himself?" they thought to themselves.

He was promptly arrested and placed in jail. Fortunately, after numerous people came to his defense (pointing out the absurdity of a Jew working to help the Germans in their war efforts), he was eventually released from jail and went on to live a beautiful life.

But there is something that amazes me about this story. When Jewish people see a wig, they see holiness and sanctity. They see the beckoning of Sinai for us to focus on our inner royalty and not our outer physicality. When a non-Jew sees a shaitel, it strikes him as so bizarre, so unusual that a woman would cover her hair, so odd that a woman would choose to hide such an attractive feature, that the only explanation they can come up with is, "That person must be a spy!"

We are a people who stood at Har Sinai and underwent a metamorphosis. A people who possess special cells which are inheritable. We are biologically different than the rest. We are a people who bridge heaven and earth. We are a people who have a spark inside of us that no matter what and no matter when will forever shine bright.

Hitler couldn't have been more right when he said, "Judaism is not a religion; it's a race." True, we are a race. One that contains unimaginable holiness. Because we don't just *think* differently. We *are* different.