

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Nitzavim - Vayeilech

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UNIQUE POTENTIAL

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all of the men of Klal Yisrael..." (29:9)

The Ohr HaChaim asks why Moshe divided everyone into categories. Why didn't Moshe just include everyone together and say that all of Bnei Yisrael, as one unit, are standing before Hashem today?

The Ohr HaChaim explains that Moshe was teaching Klal Yisrael that each person and group is only expected to fulfill the purpose that he, she or they were given.

The heads of the shevatim, the zekeinim and the officers were each responsible to complete their mission only; no one is expected to fulfill someone else's role. It is for this reason that Moshe went out of his way to categorize each group specifically.

When we evaluate who we are, we often assess ourselves based on others. We ask ourselves: "Why aren't I as successful as him or her? Why is that person a better davener? How does that person do more chessed than I do? How come I don't have the same impact as him or her?"

The Ohr HaChaim is teaching us a very powerful lesson. We are only expected to become the best version of ourselves, using the individual talents and abilities that Hashem has given to us. Hashem judges us based on our own unique capabilities.

As we reflect on our accomplishments of this past year and examine the areas we need to work on during this upcoming year, we need to stop worrying about how we measure up relative to other people. Instead, we must start focusing on who we are and who we can become with the abilities that Hashem has given to us.

FAVORING UNITY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d..." (29:9)

Rashi asks why this Parsha was written immediately after the array of curses found in the previous Parsha. He answers that the Jewish People approached Moshe after hearing all of the curses and said to him, "Who can bear these?" So Moshe began to console them and said, "You are standing today" as if to say that there was no need to fear, for even though you have angered Hashem on many occasions, He has still not destroyed you.

Rashi seems to leave out the reason why the Jewish People should not fear. After all, what was the merit that allowed them to remain standing before Hashem? The Darchei Mussar suggests that the verse's seemingly superfluous words "all of you" may provide an answer. He suggests that the merit of the entire Jewish People standing together as one unit is the merit that causes the Jewish People to find favor in Hashem's eyes. When we stand before Hashem as mere individuals, He scrutinizes our actions as individuals. But when we stand before Hashem as a People, He looks at our collective mass of good deeds and thus the individual finds favor as part of the nation.

For this reason, explains the Alter of Kelm, when one approaches Yom Kippur, when the entire world is judged for its deeds, the Jewish People as a whole are always guaranteed to survive even the strictest judgment. Therefore, every individual should attach himself to the wider needs of the Jewish People, whether it is by teaching Torah to others, helping those in need, or other acts of kindness. Through this, explains the Alter of Kelm, the individual makes himself an indispensable part of the "People" and as such, he connects himself to the favorable judgment that they are bound to receive.

TOO BIG TO FAIL

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

“You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d...” (29:9)

The Zohar comments that the word “היום” (today) in this pasuk refers to Rosh Hashanah, the day when we stand in judgment before the King of the world.

The Toldos Yaakov Yosef, the famous talmid of the Ba'al Shem Tov, explains that this pasuk alludes to us how we are to approach the judgment on Rosh Hashanah. The greatest strategy we have going into this trial is אתם נצבים היום כולכם, to stand before Hashem together with the rest of the nation; to get more involved, to dispense more kindness, to build more and stronger connections with our fellow Jews, to try harder to encourage and uplift other people.

The key to earning a favorable judgment is achdus, bonding with the rest of the nation, and remembering that we're all in this together.

A small neighborhood bank can be put out of business pretty easily, but the larger banks are too large to fail. Klal Yisrael, too, is too big to fail. If we stand before Hashem alone, as individuals, then we put ourselves at risk. But if we come together as a single, united people, then we will succeed.

Normally, when a person has a very important trial coming up, he is completely consumed by the preparations for the trial, meeting with lawyers and going over the paperwork, to the extent that he has no time for anything else. If somebody would ask him if he could host him for dinner, he would of course say he can't host anybody. He has no time to meet someone for coffee, to write a check to charity, for anything. He's too busy, and his mind is preoccupied. As we prepare for Rosh Hashanah, however, the precise opposite is true. We are to precisely spend more time connecting with others, inviting people, calling people, complimenting people, visiting people, giving support and encouragement, getting more involved in the community, looking for more ways to help out, to contribute, and to make a difference.

אתם נצבים היום כולכם. The best way to prepare for Rosh Hashanah is to bond together with our fellow Jews. We must not make the mistake of recoiling, keeping to ourselves. To the contrary, we must do what we can to stand together with the community and with Klal Yisrael.

The Mishna in Avos (2:13) teaches, אל תהי רשע בעיני עצמך - literally, “Do not be evil in your own eyes.” But the Toldos Yaakov Yosef explains this to mean that a person is a רשע when בעיני עצמך - his eyes are turned inward, to himself. We should never retreat into ourselves, caring only about our own needs and concerns. We need to be part of the community, involved members of Am Yisrael. When we are, we know we will succeed, because Am Yisrael is too big to fail.

KEEP IT MOVING

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d...” (29:9)

Angels are referred to as omdim (stationary), whereas people are referred to as holchim (moving). Angels are considered perfect as soon as they are created and cannot improve or grow in any way. Man, on the other hand, is created with many imperfections, as we say each time we make the blessing of Borei nefashos rabbos v'chesronan - “Who creates many souls and their imperfections.” We praise Hashem for purposely creating us with all sorts of deficiencies, so that we can fulfill our life's mission by constantly striving to grow and improve. In this way, we can achieve heights far beyond angels, who do not have to exert any effort to achieve perfection.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski zt'l points out that Moshe Rabbeinu was rebuking Klal Yisrael with these words. He was telling his beloved nation: “You stand this day.” Look how lax you are, just standing in one place, not improving and not progressing.

In Yiddishkeit, we are not meant to find a level on which we feel comfortable with ourselves and then not attempt to elevate ourselves. No, we must keep moving upward and onward.

SUPERNATURAL SURVIVAL

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all of the men of Klal Yisrael...” (29:9)

Our sages tell us that these words mean that the survival of the Jewish people (our “standing”) depends directly on G-d's will (i.e., is “before G-d”), rather than on the laws of cause and effect that He has embedded within nature. All other nations are subject to the laws and processes of nature, and therefore must master the natural arts of survival - including diplomacy and self-defense. The survival of the Jewish people, in contrast, depends solely on their loyalty to their covenant with G-d. If we remain true to G-d, our use of the natural avenues of survival will work, even in situations where they normally would not. If we abrogate the covenant, however, the natural avenues will not succeed, no matter how much effort we pour into them.

Therefore, no matter how dire the Jewish people's situation may seem, we can remain optimistic. Even if it seems as though, in the words of our sages, we are “a lone sheep surrounded by seventy wolves,” we should renew and strengthen our commitment to our covenant with G-d. G-d will then crown our natural efforts with supernatural success. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 1, pp. 215-216) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

STANDING UNITED

Reb Noson of Breslov

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all of the men of Klal Yisrael..." (29:9)

Moshe gathered all the people, for he was able to illumine every single Jew. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 35a)

Parashat Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh HaShanah. Since it takes a unity of people joining together with love to mitigate the decrees of the Day of Judgment, Moshe advises us to "stand" together.

On a symbolic level, "you" refers to the person, "standing" refers to the place, and "today" refers to time. By joining together, we connect the concepts of person, space and time and bring them before G-d. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 145b-146a)

"Standing" connotes prayer. (Berakhot 6b)

The Torah lists ten types of people: your leaders, your tribal heads, your elders, your officers, every man of Israel, your children, your women, your converts, those who cut lumber, and those who draw water. This teaches us the importance of unity, for all Jews, from the greatest to the smallest, must join together so their prayers can ascend on high. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 209a)

The curses are what make you stand upright. (Rashi on 29:12)

Each person must endure suffering. But that very suffering molds his ability to withstand the pressures of daily life, and strengthens him to face the future.

"Whoever is not here" - even future generations. (Rashi on 29:14)

"Today" is the most important day of your life, because it can and will have an effect on you and on all your future descendants. Our Sages (Makkot 23b) teach: "When a person performs a mitzvah, he brings credit to himself, his family, and all his future generations, forever." The converse is also true: an evil deed sends repercussions into one's present and future. Therefore "today" is the most important day of your life. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 146a)

Just as the day is continual, with darkness leading to light, so too, you will always be here and G-d will illumine for you. (Rashi on 29:12)

The darkening of day refers to the confusion wrought by the evil inclination. The illumination of day refers to the ability of a person to overcome evil. Each day contains both. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 440)

LOVING ONE ANOTHER

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers... from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:9-10)

How can we truly unite? After all, some of us are "leaders" while others are "water drawers" and the like. What could Jews of such a wide spectrum social standing possibly have in common?

The answer to this is threefold: First, who is to say who is ultimately higher on the ladder of achievement? Appearances can be deceiving, and we tend to over-evaluate ourselves while under-evaluating others.

Second, even if we have evaluated ourselves correctly, just because we excel in one particular aspect of life does not mean that there are not other aspects of life in which others exceed us. Everyone is a leader in some way; therefore, our collective success depends on every Jew's unique contribution.

Third, the difference between the Creator and any creature is infinite. Realizing our own puniness relative to G-d's absolute reality eliminates any feelings of superiority we may have over other people.

When we consider these three perspectives, we can truly stand together, united, not only with feelings of love toward each other but with behavior that testifies to the truth of these feelings. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 2, pp. 398-400)
- Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

BEHIND THE SCENES

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all of the men of Klal Yisrael..." (29:9)

Moshe gathers the Jews on the final day of his earthly life to enter them into another covenant with G-d. Moshe declares that everyone is standing before G-d, and lists leaders, tribes, elders, officers, and every man of Israel (29:9-11). The one term that doesn't seem to belong in this group is "tribes" since it doesn't refer to a specific person, whereas all the other terms do.

While Rashi suggests that the term goes together with leaders to read "tribal leaders," the wording in the pasuk seems to indicate a separate group. Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis proposes that the term "tribes" refers, in fact, to the people who run the tribes behind the scenes. This term conveys the essence of what we should be; not people focused on titles, but people that do what matters and what needs to be done. Greatness is not achieved through positions or titles but through exemplary behavior and deeds. Rosh Hashanah approaches as we read this parashah, reminding us that our focus should remain on positive actions that generate meaningful change.

ENTERING THE KING'S PALACE

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d..." (29:9)

In this verse, Moshe is telling the Jewish People that they are standing before Hashem, about to enter into His covenant and accept upon themselves all the mitzvos of the Torah. Rav Shteinman asks that in truth, every one of us is constantly standing before Hashem; if so, what is the significance at this specific point in time that Moshe had to inform the Jewish People that they were standing before Hashem?

Perhaps one could answer as follows: While it is certainly true that we are constantly standing before Hashem, there are times when we are in effect, closer to Him in a very real way. If we imagine a land where the king governs over all his subjects, we can say that they are all under the watchful eye of the king - they are all "before him." Each citizen is looked after by the king and enjoys a relationship with him, but their relationship is limited. However, a subject who approaches the king and offers to live in his palace and dedicate his entire life to the king, serving him in every way, twenty-four hours a day, is going to enjoy a much closer relationship with him.

Perhaps this is why Moshe informed the Jewish People that they were standing before Hashem. He was telling them that because they were about to enter into an eternal covenant with Hashem - to observe His Torah at all times - they were no longer merely subjects of the King, they were becoming loyal servants agreeing to live in the King's palace! As such, they were about to be "before Hashem" in a way that they had never previously experienced.

Parashas Nitzavim always falls in the close lead-up to Rosh HaShanah. This, therefore, is a time when we are preparing to stand "before Hashem" in a very real way, ready to rededicate ourselves to His service as our King. Just as the nation stood up, ready to enter into the covenant of Torah with excitement and trepidation (Yoma 4b), so too, we should approach these days with awe and anticipation as we stand up and tell Hashem, we are ready!

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Butzina D'Nehora

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers, all of the men of Klal Yisrael..." (29:9)

Whenever the need arises to take action on Judaism's behalf, to wage the good fight for G-d's glory, the people all protest: "Why choose me of all people? Leave it to the teachers, the rabbis, the leaders of the community. What can an ordinary citizen like myself do?"

However, they are in grave error. When the need arises to act "before Hashem, your G-d," you must be "standing... all of you," prepared for action, from your "heads" and "tribes" down to "your woodcutters to your water drawers" (29:10). The entire people must unite and not be content to leave the responsibility to their leaders.

ALWAYS RELEVANT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You are standing this day, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders and your officers... from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:9-10)

In these verses, G-d tells us that He made His covenant with all of us - with every type of Jew, regardless of status, gender, or age.

Inasmuch as the chief instrument of this covenant is the Torah, this means that every word of the Torah is relevant to every Jew, containing a lesson for even the youngest and uninitiated. Of course, every word of the Torah also contains infinitely more insights, of infinite sophistication and depth, which can only be understood by those with the requisite background. But these deeper levels of meaning are additional to the Torah's basic, simple meaning and lessons.

Thus, regardless of our background, the entire Torah is relevant to each of us in a way that we can immediately understand and appreciate. The deeper meanings of the Torah's words indeed beckon us, but we must always first and foremost seek to understand the Torah's message for us implicit in its simplest, most accessible meaning. (Sichot Kodesh 5739, vol. 1, pp. 235-236) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

DRAWING WISDOM

Rav Avigdor Miller

"...from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:10)

What is the benefit of undergoing deep introspection? If you get the knack of using your mind as a bucket, and you lower the bucket into the depths of your soul, you will discover that there is endless wisdom deep down there. The longer the rope, the more deeply you can lower that bucket into your mind and draw forth precious wisdom that will flow without end.

PRECIOUS DIAMONDS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Your young, your wives, and your convert who is within your camp; from your woodcutters to your water drawers..." (29:10)

Moshe Rabbeinu begins the parshah by mentioning how the great men of Klal Yisrael are all standing before him to hear his final words. But then Moshe feels the need to include others: "Your children, your women, and the stranger in the midst of your camp; from your woodcutter to your water drawer." What is unique about woodcutters and water drawers that Moshe specifically mentioned them?

A diamond merchant once met the Rebbe Rashab, Rav Shalom Dov Ber Schneerson zt'l of Lubavitch. The merchant expressed his bewilderment at the Rebbe's veneration of simple Jews. "Why does the Rebbe devote so much of his precious time to them?"

"Did you bring any diamonds with you to sell at the fair?" the Rebbe replied.

When the man replied that he had, the Rebbe asked to see them. The man opened up his bag and showed off his sparkling diamonds. Then he pointed to one stone in particular. "This one has really special qualities."

The Rebbe replied, "I don't see anything special about it."

The merchant exclaimed, "Rebbe, to properly evaluate diamonds such as these, you have to be a diamond expert!"

At that point the Rebbe shot back, "Listen to what you just said! So it is with simple Jews; you also have to be an expert of their qualities in order to appreciate them!"

Every Jew is important to Hashem. Even a simple woodcutter or water drawer is important to Hashem. A person should never think, "Who am I? What value do I possess? How could I ever elevate myself like the great tzaddikim in order to come closer to Hashem?" Each person is important, and everyone can become close to Him, for each individual possesses special qualities. True, some are covered with dust - the dust of sin - yet when we remove that dust each person can shine like a diamond. Every person can sparkle like a precious stone in the crown of the King of kings. (Pachad Dovid)

UNENDING DEVOTION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"To establish you today as His people, so that He can be your G-d, as He spoke concerning you and swore to your forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov..." (29:12)

This verse was spoken by Moshe on the last day of his life. Being a true leader, Moshe remained concerned for his people's welfare up to the very end. Furthermore, his concern for his people was not limited to his own generation, but extended to all future generations of the Jewish people. He therefore, on G-d's behalf, selflessly devoted his last moments to cementing the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people, present and future, for all time.

Moshe's example can inspire us to selflessly devote ourselves to humanity's present and future betterment, thereby preparing ourselves and the rest of humanity for the true and ultimate Redemption. (Sichot Kodesh 5738, vol. 3, pp. 460-461) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

ETERNAL COVENANT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

[Moshe told the Jewish people that G-d was sealing His covenant not only with them, but also] "with those who are not here with us today." (29:14)

The first covenant that G-d made with the Jewish people, at Har Sinai, transformed only that generation into G-d's chosen people. In order for all Jews for all time to become G-d's chosen people, a second covenant was required. Moshe made this covenant between G-d and the Jewish people forty years later, on the day of his death.

The first covenant was contingent upon the people's loyalty to G-d, as is clear from the fact that it had to be renewed after the incident of the Golden Calf. This second covenant, however, is absolute. It cannot be nullified or canceled by any inconsistencies in our behavior.

The Jews who stood before Moshe when he established this covenant with G-d were our proxies. Thus, each of us, rather than being obligated to observe the commandments and being privileged to enjoy the accompanying unique relationship with G-d only indirectly (by virtue of being a descendant of past parties to G-d's covenant) is a direct party to G-d's covenant. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 19, pp. 266-272; *ibid.*, vol. 24, pp. 188-191) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

[Moshe told the Jewish people that G-d was sealing His covenant not only with them, but also] "with those who are not here with us today." (29:14)

Even today, affirming our covenant with G-d by resolving to study His Torah and perform His commandments immediately, spontaneously, and automatically unites us with every Jew in the world.

It also unites us with every generation of the Jewish people - past, present, and future. We thus benefit from the support of all Jews in all generations in our resolve.

We may be the smallest of nations, but when it comes to issues involving the Torah, the commandments, or fulfilling our broader Divine mission - to transform the world into G-d's home - we need not fear being outnumbered. We stand together with the merits of all the generations of the Jewish people. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 19, p. 273) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

MAKING HISTORY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

[Moshe told the Jewish people that G-d was sealing His covenant not only with them, but also] "with those who are not here with us today." (29:14)

Moshe establishes the Jewish people as G-d's exclusive nation, and the covenant is not limited to those present on that day but includes all future generations (29:14). How can future generations be bound by a covenant they were not present to accept?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that just like being born is not our choice, we are still affected by what has come before us, and it is that which becomes part of our history and who we are. Just like the past influenced who we are, our actions determine what happens beyond us.

While future generations don't get to choose the world they've inherited, they will get to leave their mark on what their future will see as the history of that world. We are part of the Jewish "his-story"; our choices and what we choose to make of our chapter will determine the future of our personal story.

FREE FROM CONSTRAINTS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You know how we dwelt in the land of Egypt..." (29:15)

G-d wants us to constantly recall that we were slaves in Egypt and that He freed us from this slavery. (Pesachim 16b)

The word for "Egypt" in Hebrew (Mitzrayim) means "constraints" (meitzarim). Allegorically, then, "Egypt" signifies our personal and collective spiritual constraints.

G-d wants us to also constantly feel how He continuously frees us from our personal and collective "Egypt's."

Conscious of our absolute, G-d-given freedom, we will never be slaves to any form of negativity or evil. We can freely choose to ignore the voices - both from within and from without - that urge us to go against G-d's Will or to conform with any of the negative norms of our society. (Hitva'aduyot 5745, vol. 5, pp. 2989-2990) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

BITTER INDECISIVENESS

Yid HaKadosh

"Perhaps there is among you a root that bears poison and bitterness..." (29:17)

All bitterness comes from "perhaps." When one wishes to serve Hashem intellectually by analyzing whether "perhaps" this knowledge is correct or this wisdom is better, then this "perhaps," this ambivalence, is the "root that bears poison and bitterness" in serving Hashem.

INTEGRATING THE TORAH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"G-d will single him out for evil from among all the tribes of Israel in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this Torah scroll." (29:20)

G-d's desire is to shower us with His blessings - of longevity, health, wealth, happiness, peace, and so on. In order to enable us to create the proper vessel to hold these blessings, He has given us His instructions regarding how to live our lives: the Torah. It is therefore imperative that we relate to the Torah holistically, as a grand plan for individual and communal living. It is tempting to evaluate which aspects of the Torah and its commandments seem reasonable to us and which do not, but this approach deprives us of experiencing G-d's involvement in our lives as an organic unity - a fully integrated system for transforming ourselves and actualizing our greatest potentials.

By embracing the full spectrum of the Torah's light and aspiring to live our lives accordingly, we enable ourselves to receive G-d's blessings to the fullest and most effective extent. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 14, pp. 108-113) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

HIDDEN AND REVEALED

Reb Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye

"The secret things belong to Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, so that we may do all the words of this Torah." (29:28)

When one is involved in the material needs that are "for us and our children," such as earning a living, the physical side of us is revealed.

The hidden refers to the spiritual side when one is attached to Hashem, our G-d.

TODAY CAN BE THE DAY

Kesav Sofer

"The secret things belong to Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, so that we may do all the words of this Torah." (29:28)

Redemption will be ushered in by two distinct eras. The first is the hidden one, the time ordained for the actual arrival of our deliverance, that is known only to G-d. But there is also another era that will be revealed and known before us; an era that will begin when the Jews repent of their sins.

The Sages say: "Even today, if only you will listen to My voice." Mashiach may come this very day, if only we will heed G-d's voice. When this day will come depends entirely on us and on our deeds, on whether we are willing to repent of our sins and mend our ways.

Thus, the Torah states: “The secret things belong to Hashem our G-d” - the time appointed for the actual deliverance is hidden from our view and known only to G-d, but “the revealed things” - the revealed era, “belongs to us and to our children forever, so that we may do all the words of this Torah.” If we will faithfully observe the Torah’s commandments, we can hasten the redemption so that it may even come this very day.

BLESSING WITHIN THE CURSE

Kesav Sofer

“It will be when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse I have presented before you - then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you...” (30:1)

It is during the time of the curse, when the Jews are in exile beset with oppressors and foes, that the blessing becomes most apparent. That “blessing” is G-d’s special care and providence that has permitted the Jewish people to survive despite all the persecution and oppression it has suffered at the hands of innumerable powerful nations.

As the Sages (Yoma 69) say: “But for the fear of Him, how could one single nation persist among the many nations?” If we reflect on the miracle that the blessing lies within the curse, that even in exile we have with us Divine Providence that “looks down from the windows and peers through the cracks” (Shir HaShirim 2:9) to protect us from the evil plans laid by our foes to destroy us, we must, of necessity, come to a point where we will take it to heart and repent.

MEMORABLE INCENTIVES

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“It will be when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse I have presented before you - then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you...” (30:1)

Moshe informs the people that they should take note of the blessing and the curse placed before them when they are banished for sinning (30:1). While it makes sense that the curses would be mentioned when referencing the people’s sins, why are the blessings also mentioned here?

Ohr HaChaim suggests that we need to fully appreciate the blessings we are missing in order to feel genuine remorse. Remembering the good times will motivate us to improve our ways and regain what we once had.

The curses remind us of the strain that sins place on our relationships, and the blessings show us what’s possible and motivate us to strengthen those relationships. A reminder of what was is a powerful harbinger (and tool) of what could be.

REVEALING OUR BELIEFS

M’Otzreinu HaYashan

“The secret things belong to Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children...” (29:28)

There are Jews who conceal their Jewish faith and belief from the world, until Hashem is the only One Who knows of it. We must take into consideration that the revealed things belong to us and to our children. Our Judaism should be open and apparent at home, in the street, and most importantly, to our children.

HE WILL NEVER LET GO

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

“It will be when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse I have presented before you - then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you...” (30:1)

The Alshich says that there is a big difference between an item that is thrown and one that is dispersed. When I throw something, it leaves my hand and lands in its place. When I disperse something or drag it to where it needs to go; I never actually let go of it.

The Alshich explains that even in our exile, we see the Hand of Hashem and His love for us. We are nidachim - scattered, and not nishlachim - thrown. Even in our exile, Hashem never lets go of us, as Chazal tell us that when we are in galus, we need to grieve for the fact that the Shechinah is in exile with us.

The Dubno Maggid says that the idea that the Divine is also in exile with us is alluded to if we read the pasuk in the following way:

- והשבת אל לבבך - You need to be aware and place this information in your heart.
- בכל הגוים אשר הדיחך ה' אלוך - Amongst all the nations to where Hashem, your G-d, dispersed you,
- שמה - He is here, as in עמו אנכי בצרה (Otzar Chaim, p. 176).

Rabbi Yonasan Eibeshitz (Talelei Oros, p. 192) writes on the verse (30:4): “If your dispersed will be at the ends of heaven, from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you in, and from there He will take you.” When we fulfill the will of Hashem, we draw ourselves closer to heaven, to spirituality, and to Hashem. If we sin, we distance ourselves from heaven, and the more we sin, the greater the distance from heaven, until we reach katzei shamayim - the furthest point from Heaven possible.

However, even if we are so far removed and find ourselves at that furthest point, Hashem will not abandon us, but rather יקבץך ה' אלוך ומשם יקחך - “from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you in and from there He will take you,” because He has never let go of us and is with us in our exile.

INFUSING DIVINITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You will return to Hashem, your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul..." (30:2)

Mistakes and failures are part of life, and thus, regret and resolve are also part of life. It is therefore important to understand how to properly repent for our misdeeds - what to regret and how to resolve to live in the future.

Mistakes and misdeeds are often the result of exaggerated or improper involvement in the material aspects of life. Aware of this, we may sometimes be inclined to avoid or renounce one or more aspects of our physical lives altogether. Such a reaction, however, can be a mistake. Our sages teach us that the proper response to our awareness of the pitfalls of material life is not to flee from it, but to infuse our material lives with Divine consciousness.

The way we learn and train ourselves to infuse our material lives with Divine consciousness is by studying G-d's Torah and observing His commandments. Thus, our desire to repair our lives fuels a renewed enthusiasm for our study of the Torah and our observance of its commandments. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 38, pp. 24-25) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

REPENTANCE = TRANQUILITY

Rebbe Nachman

"You will return to Hashem, your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul..." (30:2)

V'shavta (ושבת, you will return) has the same root as Shabbat (שבת). Shabbat is compared to the World to Come. The principal reward of Shabbat and the World to Come is an ever greater recognition of G-d. That is the nature of the "return to Hashem, your G-d."

V'shavta (ושבת, you will return) has the same root as Shabbat (שבת), indicating a connection between Shabbat and Teshuvah (תשובה, return or repentance).

There are two types of repentance: incomplete and complete. The first type is that of a person who is occupied in business and involved in the transient things of this world. In the midst of this, it occurs to him to repent, but afterwards he returns to his original behavior. This type of repentance corresponds to the six weekdays, which in turn parallel the six Mishnaic concepts - permitted and forbidden, fit and unfit, pure and impure. Such a person has no calm, being at one time forbidden, then at another time permitted; fit, then unfit; pure, then impure.

In contrast, a person who overcomes his trials and returns completely to G-d exemplifies complete repentance, which corresponds to Shabbat. Such a person has calm, because "when Shabbat comes, rest comes."

RETURNING WHAT WAS LOST

Reb Noson of Breslov

"You will return to Hashem, your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul..." (30:2)

"You will return" - even from the lowest levels, G-d will enable you to return to Him. (Likutei Halakhot II, p. 420)

Sin causes a person to "lose" a part of his holiness, a spark of his soul. Just as one who loses an object must search for it, so too, a person must search for the "lost" particles of his soul.

Repentance means finding those lost sparks and "returning" them to their rightful place. Thus, it is written, "You will be lost... from there you will seek Hashem, your G-d, and you will find Him." (Likutei Halakhot II, p. 95a)

OUR INNER YEARNING

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"You will return to Hashem, your G-d, and obey Him exactly as I am commanding you today..." (30:2)

The Torah seems to repeat itself quite a number of times when discussing the mitzvah of teshuvah. In a span of ten pesukim, the requirement to "return" to Hashem through repentance is mentioned no less than seven times!

Furthermore, oftentimes a person is blinded and does not see his own character flaws. It is only once he begins to do teshuvah that he becomes aware of what he must correct.

This seems to lead one into a proverbial "Catch 22" situation! We must see our faults to do teshuvah, but we must do teshuvah to see our faults! So how does one begin?

The holy Baal Shem Tov zt'l explains that teshuvah is an act of chessed from Hashem. Every day a bas kol - Heavenly voice cries out imploring us all to do teshuvah. But while none of us actually hear the sound of this bas kol, our neshamos - souls hear it.

Our neshamos feel the holiness emanating forth and our neshamos yearn for closeness to Hashem. The more a person taps into his neshamah - his spiritual essence, the faster he will tune into the bas kol.

Therefore, once a person is stimulated and involves himself in spiritual pursuits, i.e. teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah, the sooner Hashem initiates and sets the teshuvah process in motion.

And how do we know that we are on the right track, that we are truly doing teshuvah? Says Rav Avraham Blumenkrantz zt'l, the Torah writes, "Return to Hashem, your G-d." Each and every Jew must do teshuvah until Hashem becomes "your G-d." When you feel a special kesher, a close personal bond with Hashem, you know you're on the right track, the track of proper repentance!

RISING ABOVE VS. DIGGING DEEPER

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“You will return to Hashem, your G-d... with all your heart and with all your soul.” (30:2)

Whereas we are here commanded to return to G-d with all our heart and soul, we have been commanded previously to love G-d not only with all our heart and soul, but with “all our might.” What is the reason for this difference?

Loving G-d “with all our might” means being devoted to Him beyond what we consider “normal,” i.e., beyond what makes sense logically. Repentance, on the other hand, requires that we forge a stronger relationship with G-d than our present one. That relationship with G-d, after all, was too weak to keep us from wrongdoing and therefore from needing to repent. We therefore need to deepen our feelings toward G-d, in order for Him to mean more to us than the indulgences that we have learned to rationalize.

Thus, whereas the Torah bids us to love G-d beyond what seems “normal,” it bids us to repent by making what used to be “beyond” us into our new “normal.” The processes associated with repentance and love are directly opposite, love taking us beyond our innate limitations and repentance bringing transcendence into limited consciousness. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 14, p. 120) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

COLLECTING THE SCATTERED

Rebbe Nachman

“Hashem, your G-d, will bring back your exiles and have compassion on you. He will once again gather you in from all the nations to which Hashem, your G-d, scattered you...” (30:3)

A person who sins fragments his daat (higher perception). Consequently, his sparks of holiness are scattered throughout the world. Through repentance, he begins the process of restoring his daat and elevating his sparks.

The phrase “your exiled ones” refers to the daat and holy sparks that are scattered throughout the world, awaiting rectification. Through the study of Torah, a person experiences a revelation of G-dliness, which causes him to repent. Thus, G-dliness - as attained through Torah study - leads to repentance, which will “bring back your exiled ones.” (See Likutey Moharan I, 105:1)

ALWAYS ACCESSIBLE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Hashem, your G-d, will bring back your exiles and have compassion on you...” (30:3)

This phrase may also be read, “Hashem, your G-d, will return together with your exiles,” implying that G-d, so to speak, accompanies us into exile.

This notion may be likened to the law that stipulates that when a student commits an act of unintentional murder, requiring him to be exiled to a city of refuge, his teacher must accompany him (Makkos 10a). G-d is our teacher and we are His students (Yeshayahu 54:13); thus, when we go into exile, G-d must go into exile along with us.

This means that G-d is just as accessible to us in exile as He was before we were exiled and as He will be after the Redemption. This includes all our states of personal “exile” - i.e., situations in which we feel estranged from holiness or apathetic to it. Even at such times, G-d is nearby; opening the lines of communication is entirely up to us. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

GRABBING THE GOOD

Reb Eliezer HaLevi Horowitz of Tarnigrad

“If your dispersed will be at the ends of the heavens, from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you in and from there He will take you...” (30:4)

Why does the verse state, “at the ends of the heavens,” and not “from the ends of the earth”?

The Baal Shem Tov tried to find the good in the actions of the Jewish People. Even when he found someone who did not deal properly in business, he tried to find something positive on their behalf. Perhaps he had to pay tuition, wanted to give charity, or needed necessities for the Shabbat... Likewise, when you have transgressed but the end result is for the sake of heaven, then “from there Hashem, your G-d will gather you in” - from that little spark that might be in the transgression, and from that spark within your thought that was for heaven’s sake, you will be saved from going on the wrong path.

PURE HEART = PURE MIND

Rebbe Nachman

“Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants...” (30:6)

“Circumcise your heart” - this means G-d will do away with the foolishness of your heart. (Targum Onkelos)

When a person repents, he eradicates the foolishness that led him to sin and attains a pure heart. Then he can pray with a clear mind. (See Likutey Moharan I, 76:5)

REMOVING THE BLOCKAGES

Dubno Maggid

“And Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart... so that you may live...” (30:6)

Once G-d removes the obstruction closing up your heart, you will be able to enjoy the Torah and its commandments and delight in them as much as you enjoy physical pleasures. Then you will love the Torah just as you love the other things that keep you alive; “that you may live.”

TAKING THE FIRST STEP

Kotzker Rebbe

“Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants...” (30:6)

It states in Devarim 10:16: “You shall circumcise the block of your heart.” However, in our pasuk it states: “Hashem will circumcise...”

This is because the individual must make a beginning. He must cut “the block” that is in the heart to accept Hashem’s word. However, changing from evil to good the human being cannot do by himself. Only Hashem can help, and that is why it states: “Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart.”

DOING OUR PART

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants to love Hashem, your G-d, with all of your heart and all of your soul so that you may live...” (30:6)

The Kotzker Rebbe (Ohel Torah) notes that while in this pasuk, the Torah conveys to us that Hashem will circumcise our hearts, in Parshas Eikev, the Torah instructs us to circumcise our own hearts. How are we to reconcile this seeming contradiction?

The Kotzker Rebbe explains that the Torah is teaching us that we need to take the first step in initiating and developing a relationship with Hashem. Once we demonstrate effort on our end, by attempting to remove any barriers between us and Hashem, then Hashem will help eliminate any impediments. This explains why in Parshas Eikev, the Torah instructs us to circumcise our hearts, and then here, in Parshas Nitzavim, Hashem communicates that He will help us with this process as well. The Kotzker Rebbe adds that in order to really rid ourselves of those things that could lead us down the wrong path, we need Hashem’s help. However, Hashem’s assistance is contingent on our active participation.

As we progress through the month Elul, we must evaluate and determine which aspects of our relationship with Hashem need improvement. Hashem is waiting to help us, but we have to do our part and demonstrate how much we desire a connection with Him. Let us show Hashem who we really are by taking the first step, and Hashem will help carry us the rest of the way.

SEEING THE GOOD IN EVERYTHING

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“You will return [to Him] and listen to His voice...” (30:8)

By “listening to G-d’s voice,” Moshe meant not only that we would obey G-d, but that we would recognize the inner message of His voice.

Our belief that G-d is good and that all He does is good enables us to thank Him for everything in life - even what seems to be the opposite of good. In the merit of this belief, G-d will eventually show us how everything He does is truly good. (Hitva’aduyot 5746, vol. 3, pp. 346-348) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

NONDEDUCTIBLE GOODNESS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“Hashem, your G-d, will make you abundant in all your handiwork... for G-d will rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your fathers.” (30:9)

The word for “will make you abundant” [והויתירך] can be related to the verb root that means “more than” and “remain” [יתר]. The Torah thus implies here that what G-d gives us in this world will not be deducted from our reward in the World to Come. This is because when He bestows goodness on us in this world, He derives pleasure from doing so.

[Thus, G-d bestows goodness upon us because He wants to, not in order to reward us for our good behavior. G-d therefore does not deduct the goodness that He bestows upon us in this world from our reward in the afterlife.]

This, then, is the denotation of the term “will make you abundant”: He will not subtract from our merits on account of our receiving goodness in this world. On the contrary, the benevolence we receive in this world is over and above [יתר] the reward that we will receive in the World to Come. He will leave over [ויתיר] our merits, and we will be rewarded for them in the World to Come. Why? Because G-d enjoys giving us the goodness in this world. This is what the verse alludes to when it says, “For G-d will once again rejoice over you for good.” Amen.

JOY TO HASHEM

Reb Dovid Shlomo Eibenschutz

“Hashem, your G-d, will make you abundant in all your handiwork... for G-d will rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your fathers.” (30:9)

There is a reason a reward is given for each mitzvah. For example: “If in my statutes you walk... Then will I give you rains in their due season” (Vayikra 26:3); “And it shall come to pass, if you will listen diligently to My commandments... That I will send rain for your land in its time...” (Devarim 11:13-14). Yet there is a statement in Avos (1:3): “Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward.”

The intention should not be to perform a mitzvah to receive a reward and derive pleasure from the reward. The intent should be to give the Almighty pleasure, for He wishes to give benefits and rewards to His creation. That is the way to receive a reward: to feel that we are doing the will of Hashem.

HASHEM'S JOY IN GIVING

Tiferes Shlomo

"Hashem, your G-d, will make you abundant in all your handiwork... for G-d will rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your fathers." (30:9)

G-d does good and takes enormous pleasure in doing good. Particularly, He takes delight in being able to deal kindly with the Jews. Hence, once we repent of our sins and mend our ways - thereby enabling G-d to do good to us - we afford Him pleasure by the mere fact that we have made ourselves worthy of receiving His favors. This pleasure we give to G-d carries its own reward, quite apart from the reward due us for repentance.

Therefore, the Torah says: "G-d will give you surplus... for good" - G-d will give you good things over and beyond the reward for your repentance. In addition, He will reward you for the fact that "G-d will rejoice over you for good"; this means that He will reward you for having made it possible, by your good deeds, for G-d to rejoice and to take pleasure at the thought that He will be able to do good to you.

SURPLUS OF KINDNESS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Hashem, your G-d, will make you abundant in all your handiwork..." (30:9)

Mashal: The great rav of Yerushalayim, Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld zt'l, once hosted guests for the Shabbos of Parshas Nitzavim, just a few days before Rosh Hashanah. On Motzei Shabbos, the guests thanked him for his warm hospitality and parted ways, saying, "A gut voch (have a good week)!"

In response, R' Yosef Chaim replied with conviction, "And to you, a gut yahr (have a good year)!"

The people exited the rav's house and were halfway down the block when they heard someone running behind them in hot pursuit. Turning around, they were shocked to see R' Yosef Chaim himself flagging them down. Immediately, they stopped. "Is everything alright? Did we forget something?" they asked.

Shaking his head vigorously, R' Yosef Chaim answered, "No, you didn't forget anything. But as soon as you left, I recalled the words of Chazal, that one should always pay back a favor in greater measure than it was given. Since there are only a few days left in this year, when I said, 'Gut yahr,' it was actually a lesser brachah than your wishes for a gut voch. Therefore, I came back to offer a proper response: Gut yahr twice - once for this year and once for the coming year!"

Nimshal: The Vilna Gaon zt'l (Yehoshua 2:12) explains the meaning of chessed v'emes - "kindness and truth," by quoting the words of the Sages: "One who is fed lentils by his friend is obligated to feed him stuffed pheasant in return."

When one repays a friend equal to what his friend has done for him, this is emes, truth. Chessed, on the other hand, is going the extra mile, doing a "surplus" of good. It is the obligation to extend oneself and "feed him stuffed pheasant"!

IT'S ALL ABOUT CONNECTIONS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"When you listen to the voice of Hashem, to observe His commandments and statutes written in this Torah, when you return to Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul..." (30:10)

When conveying the abundance that will follow when our relationship with G-d is restored, the Torah describes, "When you listen to the voice [singular] of G-d, to observe His commandments and statutes written [singular] in this Torah, when you return to the Lord your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul" (30:10). If there are a myriad of commandments and statutes written in the Torah, why is the word "written" in singular? Also, why does the Torah use the word "listen" when specifically referring to the written word of the Torah?

Rav Hirsch suggests that although the Torah contains an abundance of rules, they all stem from one singular "voice" and point to one singular intent: of building and strengthening our hearts' and souls' connection to G-d.

Rather than getting caught up in the minutia of the laws, concentrating on their purpose (i.e., their voice, which takes into account the text and the intonation, reflecting emotion and affection) will guide us to integrity with our actions and intent, which will lead to true happiness. This synergy of action and intent is a practical tool for us to apply to all our interpersonal connections.

INNATE LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"This commandment is not abstruse to you, nor is it distant..." (30:11)

All of us have the power to train our hearts to become emotionally involved with G-d through studying His Torah and observing His commandments. We possess this power in the form of an inherent, deep-seated love for G-d that is innate to our Divine soul.

This love is initially "hidden," i.e., we are not conscious of it. However, we can easily access it by means of a number of rather simple exercises in contemplating Divine providence, the vastness and beauty of creation, and so on.

We therefore do not have to "manufacture" love of G-d or force ourselves, against our nature, to love Him. We already naturally love Him; all we have to do is open ourselves up to this love, allowing it to manifest itself. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 34, pp. 173-178) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

NOT TOO DIFFICULT

Reb Noson of Breslov

"This commandment is not abstruse to you, nor is it distant..." (30:11)

G-d asks only for a little bit of effort and expense on the part of each person.

For the sacrifices, He asks for offerings of sheep and doves, not mountain goats or llamas. For the upkeep of the Temple, He asks for a half-shekel, not a whole shekel or many times that amount. Tzitzit cost very little, and the material for tefillin can be found easily, not in deserts or wildernesses but on nearby farms.

Rebbe Nachman once said (Tzaddik # 558), "The most awesome devotions to G-d are easier to attain than a small profit!" (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 474)

SIMPLER THAN YOU MAY THINK

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"It is not abstruse to you, nor is it distant... For the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your mind..." (30:11,14)

Mashal: A man who had a terrible drinking problem vehemently denied that he had a problem, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. No matter how much he drank and made a spectacle of himself, he would steadfastly maintain that he was perfectly in control, that he could hold his liquor.

Ultimately, he was forced to enter an alcohol treatment program. After a number of months, he finally began to show progress on his way to recovery.

It was then that he confided, "The real reason why I was so obstinate in refusing to admit that I had a drinking problem was because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to quit."

The man had known all along that he had a problem but denied it publicly because he feared he would fail if he tried to quit. He insisted there was no problem and thus continued his self-destructive behavior.

Nimshal: Some people think that the ability to grow and reach great heights in Torah and Yiddishkeit is an achievement that is only possible for a select few, the holy and wise men of Bnei Yisrael, but well beyond the reach of the average person.

However, this is what Moshe was telling Bnei Yisrael. The Torah, with its six hundred and thirteen mitzvos, might appear so difficult to fulfill that people will say, "What's the use of trying? I can't possibly comply with all the requirements of the Torah." Not only is it possible, it's even simpler than one might think. All one has to do is make the decision, commit himself to it, and the rest will follow.

A WAY OF LIFE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"It is not in Heaven, for you to say, 'Who will go up to Heaven for us, and acquire it for us, and inform us of it, and we'll fulfill it?'" (30:12)

The Gemara (Shabbos 88b) relates that when Moshe Rabbeinu went up to Heaven to receive the Torah, the angels objected. The Torah should not be given to humans, they argued. The immense spiritual nature of the Torah requires it to remain in Heaven, in the domain of the angels. Moshe convinced them, however, that they had no right to the Torah since the mitzvos and events mentioned within the Torah apply to the Jewish People here on this world, and not to celestial beings. How is this to be understood? Did the angels not recognize the fact that they are incapable of performing the mitzvos?

Rav Yechezkel Abramsky zt'l answers that the angels were well aware of what is written in the Torah. They knew that they could not actually keep the mitzvos and they were even willing to let Bnei Yisrael have the Torah. What they really wanted, though, was that the Heavenly Court maintain the ultimate authority over the Torah's interpretation. The halachic rulings, they argued, are of such a lofty nature, that mere mortals are incapable of extracting the true interpretation of the Torah.

Moshe, however, reminded them that since angels could not fulfill the Torah, they had no right to decide its halachic rulings. One who is incapable of actually performing the mitzvos is likewise incapable of understanding their true depth. The study of Torah and its practical applications are inseparable.

This became clear when our ancestors said, "Na'aseh v'nishma" on Har Sinai. These words convey a basic truth: "We will do," and only then, "we will hear." Performance of the mitzvos is what must accompany intense study and a real attempt to understand the mitzvos' true meaning.

The most brilliant interpretation by one who does not observe the Torah is accorded no weight; the Torah is first and foremost a way of life.

ALWAYS AVAILABLE

Toldos Yaakov Yosef

"It is not in Heaven, for you to say, 'Who will go up to Heaven for us, and acquire it for us, and inform us of it, and we'll fulfill it?'" (30:12)

One should not say that if he were to reside in a city that is replete with righteous people who are attached to the heavens, he would be able to serve Hashem. The Torah teaches us that it need not be "in the heavens" nor "across the sea" but "the matter is near to you" - on whatever level one has reached one can serve Hashem, for the Divine Presence is on all levels and everywhere.

HASHEM KNOWS OUR LIMITATIONS

Reb Noson of Breslov

"It is not in Heaven, for you to say, 'Who will go up to Heaven for us, and acquire it for us, and inform us of it, and we shall fulfill it?'" (30:12)

If it were in Heaven, you would have to go up there to study it. (Rashi)

In reality, there are no limits to how high a person can strive to attain spirituality. But G-d does not demand superhuman efforts. G-d knows that man is earthly in nature and cannot sustain a totally spiritual life. Therefore, He brought the lofty Torah down to a worldly level - "in your mouth and your heart" - so that everyone, at his level, can do his best to fulfill it. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 508)

A CLEAR PATH HOME

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it..." (30:14)

The "thing" referred to in this verse is the Torah in general (according to Rashi), and the directive to return to G-d in particular (according to the Ramban). G-d assures us that we always possess the inner capability to lead full, consummate lives, no matter how far we are, physically or spiritually, from where we should be. It is only a matter of exercising our free choice to do so. When inspired by an inner drive to return to G-d and cling to Him, studying the Torah and observing G-d's commandments become natural and accessible.

Returning to G-d, after all, is returning to our authentic, innermost selves. When we allow our inner essence to shine, the interference from conflicting drives and façades that we so often convince ourselves that we must maintain disappears. Our direction becomes clear, and we become surprised by the power we suddenly possess to improve our behavior, to inspire others, and to affect the world. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 34, pp. 171-172) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

FROM THE HEART TO THE MOUTH

Reb Noson of Breslov

"The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it..." (30:14)

To serve G-d properly, one must articulate his heart's desires. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 290)

The primary way to draw G-dliness is through "your mouth and your heart." That is, your mouth and heart should be close to one another: what is in your mouth should be bound tightly to your heart. Whatever feelings you harbor in your heart, learn to articulate them.

INTERNAL HARMONY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it..." (30:14)

In Parashas Nitzavim, Moshe famously explains that the commandments are there for us to observe and that "it is very close to you; it is in your mouth and your heart so that you can fulfill it" (30:14). Rashi explains that this curious mouth/heart wording refers to the Oral and Written Laws.

While it makes sense for "in your mouth" to correspond to the Oral Laws, how does "in your heart" pertain to the Written Law? Wouldn't it more literally be "on your bookshelves"?

One possible answer could be that after learning, analyzing, and appreciating G-d's laws, one would internalize them to the point where they are regarded naturally, from the heart. It could be that the pasuk is outlining an action plan for complete internal harmony.

The first step is to study and learn so that we appreciate the Torah's directions to the point where we internalize them. The second step is to express verbally what our heart feels, followed by the third step of acting on those thoughts and expressions. When our minds, words, and actions all align, we are ready to live life fully.

MAKING ROOM FOR DAAS

Rebbe Nachman

"The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it..." (30:14)

There are two types of perceptions or spiritual lights: internal and transcendental. The perceptions that a person grasps with his intellect are said to be "contained" in his mind, while those that are impossible for him to understand are said to "surround" his mind from without, and are thus known as makifin (encircling).

When one speaks with friends in order to instill them with daat (knowledge of G-d) and fear of Heaven, and in order to produce disciples, his mind becomes "emptied" of his previous perceptions and he is able to internalize the light of the makifin, increasing his own knowledge and awareness of G-d.

Thus, "The matter is very close to you" - in order to bring close the makifin - "in your mouth and your heart" - you must use your mouth to speak wisdom with others - "to do it" - and thereby internalize the transcendental perceptions. (See Likutey Moharan II, 7:6)

KEEPING IT FRESH

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

"See, I placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil..." (30:15)

Rabbi Yosef Zvi HaLevi Dunner asks: Why is it necessary for the pasuk to include the word היום - today? It would have been equally understood if the word had been omitted and would have just read "Behold, I have set before you life and good." Why the extra word היום?

Rav Dunner notes that we find at least two other places in the Torah where the use of the word in seems superfluous, and in both places, Rashi makes the same comment. The first occasion is in the pasuk (Shemos 19:1) that reads: "In the third month of the children of Yisrael's departure from Egypt, on this day (ביום הזה) they arrived in the desert of Sinai." The second occasion is where it says (Devarim 11:13), "And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day (היום) to love Hashem, your G-d, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul."

In both cases, Rashi explains that the word היום or ביום means that the command that is being mentioned in the pasuk should be as fresh to you today as if you had just been commanded to observe it for the first time.

When it comes to mitzvah observance and our relationship with The Almighty, we need to keep things fresh, new, and exciting as if we were keeping the mitzvos for the very first time.

ביום הזה באו מדבר סיני and מצוה אתכם היום tell us that every day should feel to us as we have just arrived at Har Sinai and have just received the Torah directly from Hashem. If we could live at this level, our approach to every mitzvah, even those that we have been observing for many years, would be charged and energized.

Using this approach, Rav Dunner suggests that the use of the word own in our pasuk comes to tell us that when it comes to the battle between good and evil, life and death, then ראה נתתי לפניך היום - every day needs to be approached as a new battle. Every day will present new challenges, and even if we were successful in overcoming the difficulties of yesterday, past performance is no guarantee that we will meet the challenges of today, even if those challenges turn out to be the very same ones we conquered yesterday. Every day poses new challenges, but also new opportunities to strengthen our relationship with Hashem and His Torah. We must never become complacent, lazy, or smug. The yetzer hara never rests, and we must be vigilant to succeed in overcoming him today as we did yesterday.

LIVING LIFE TO ITS FULLEST

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"See, I placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I placed before you blessing and curse, choose life..." (30:15-19)

Moshe tells the Jews that there is free choice between good and evil, life and death, and that they should choose life so that they may live (30:19). Since it seems like an obvious choice, what can we glean from this that is not obvious and apparent?

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky comments that following the Torah's laws is not just a choice for life and its respective reward but a decision to live life to its fullest.

He adds that the Torah doesn't just convey a life of rituals and rules but proposes a life filled with happiness and purpose.

THE CHOSEN PATH

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"See, I placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I placed before you blessing and curse, choose life..." (30:15-19)

These verses come to warn the Jewish People that they have the freedom to choose how they live their lives. Ultimately, though, they should choose life - to serve Hashem.

One of the Rishonim, the Toras HaMinchah, notes that the verse should have said, "I will place before you" all of these options; when did Hashem "place" - in the past - life, goodness, death, and evil before them?

The Toras HaMinchah provides a fascinating answer. He explains that in truth, we were all given the choice between life and goodness, death and evil before we were born. For, our soul was permitted to decide precisely what our nature would be like, how we would live, and what opportunities we would be presented with throughout our lifetime.

For instance, a soul may choose to serve Hashem by having wealth in its lifetime: On the one hand, wealth offers the ability to spend time involved in Torah study and acts of kindness. On the other hand, it may lead to self-assurance and hinder a reliance on Hashem for success and security.

Or a soul may choose to be poor. While there is a risk that the difficulties of destitution would prevent a joyful relationship with Hashem, the ability to serve Hashem comes at a lower price, with even a small amount of tzedakah being significant or a small amount of learning becoming cherished by Hashem, for instance.

Incredibly, the Toras HaMinchah adds that the soul's ability to decide its nature not only applies to its physical wellbeing but also its spiritual disposition. Namely, will he have a drive for righteousness? Will he be easily inspired? If the soul chooses this option, he will indeed be more likely to serve Hashem throughout his lifetime.

On the other hand, since this is its natural disposition, the reward will not be that great - if he would stray from the path of Torah, his punishment would be much more severe. On the other hand, a soul who chooses to be born into circumstances that would naturally challenge its observance levels would not be punished so much if it did indeed succumb to its desires, whereas successfully overcoming the evil inclination would be a far greater display of honoring Hashem.

If we factor in previous reincarnations too, the soul's calculation becomes even more complicated. For example, perhaps a person misused his wealth in a previous existence, and therefore, in his future incarnation he may choose to be poor so as not to risk making the same mistakes, or maybe he would try again to be wealthy hoping that he would do better this time around.

Ultimately, though, every soul made an exacting calculation regarding what circumstances it could best bring honor to Hashem when it would come to the world. Accordingly, Hashem's instruction to the Jewish People to "choose life" served as a reminder to them that their souls had already chosen the best path to serve Him, and they should not abandon it now.

This incredible insight should provide us with so much encouragement. For, if we are facing challenges, we should know that we decided in the grand scheme of things that these challenges are the best way for us to serve Hashem. And where we are comfortable, we should know how much we are expected to push ourselves to achieve greatness.

Whatever life we chose for ourselves, though, we have to now re-choose life - to serve Hashem in all circumstances to the best of our ability!

A REFLECTION OF US

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"See, I placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I placed before you blessing and curse, choose life..." (30:15-19)

Mashal: A father and son are hiking in the mountains. Suddenly, the son falls on a rock, scrapes himself and calls out in pain, "Ahhh!"

To his surprise, he hears a voice repeating, somewhere in the distance, "Ahhh!"

He pauses. Then, curious, he yells out, "Who's there?" Immediately, he receives the response, "Who's there?"

Angered at the non-answer, he screams, "Coward!"

He receives the answer, "Coward!"

He looks to his father and asks, "Father, what is this?"

His father smiles and says, "My son, pay attention." And then he screams out to the mountain, "I admire you!"

Instantly, a voice answers, "I admire you!"

Again the man screams, "You are the best!"

The same voice answers, "You are the best!"

The boy is surprised, but does not understand. Then the father explains: "People call this an echo, but really this is life. It gives you back everything you say or do. Our life is simply a reflection of our actions. If you want more love in the world, create more love in your heart. Remember, son, your life is not a coincidence; it is a reflection of you!"

Nimshal: Two pathways are spread out before every person: "Life and Goodness" or "Death and Evil." Free will dictates that man can steer his destiny in any way he chooses.

Moshe exhorts his beloved nation, Klal Yisrael, that there really is only one path to choose: Choose life, choose goodness, choose Torah as your guide to lead your life. If you choose a "life" of Torah, Hashem will grant you success in all your endeavors.

CHOOSING GOOD

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"See, I placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I placed before you blessing and curse, choose life..." (30:15-19)

It is not always clear that good behavior leads to blessings and life and that bad behavior leads to curses and death. This allows us the free will to choose to be good. If it were always clear that good behavior leads to blessing and life, whereas bad behavior leads to the opposite, what choice could we have but to be good? The very fact that being good does not always lead to goodness both forces us and enables us to base our relationship with G-d on a more profound basis.

For this reason, on a deeper level, G-d (through Moshe) is here asking us to be good for its own sake, rather than for any expectation of material reward, even when we do see clearly that being good leads to good results. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 28, p. 8a) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

BUILDING ON TODAY

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"See, I placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I placed before you blessing and curse, choose life..." (30:15-19)

What does the Torah mean when it says "today"? This choice was given to us when we accepted the Torah forty years earlier. Why does the Torah declare that the choice to observe the mitzvos was given to us "today"?

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Darash Moshe) explains that Torah is telling us that while the Torah may have been given to us many years ago, we have the opportunity to re-accept, re-affirm and re-energize ourselves in our observance and commitment to it on any given day.

Each and every day of our lives is a new opportunity to jump start ourselves and make amends. It is for this reason that the Torah uses the word "today."

We often get caught up in worrying about what will happen tomorrow instead of focusing on today. As the famous saying goes, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Let us build one "today" upon the next so that we can accomplish great things.

WE HAVE A CHOICE

Rabbi Elya Brudny

“See, I placed before you today life and goodness, and death and evil... I placed before you blessing and curse, choose life...” (30:15-19)

We have the choice. U’vacharta ba’chaim - choose life. Every one of us is invested with the power to choose good from bad, right from wrong. We were given the choice at the start of the path, and now we have the choice to turn back and start again. If we have the choice, then it’s our battle. Along with the choice comes the power.

It’s very difficult, sometimes, but we must internalize that the ability to change is a reality: and this is the moment of truth. We might slip and stumble, but our job is to engage in battle and try.

ENHANCING LIFE

Rebbe Nachman

“To love Hashem, your G-d, to obey Him and to cleave to Him; for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land...” (30:20)

If someone separates himself from the Torah, it is as if he separates from life itself. (Zohar I, 92a)

Ki Hu Chayekha (for He is your life) can also be translated as “for it is your life.” A person’s life force comes principally from the Torah. Thus, the more one devotes himself to the Torah by studying and observing it, the more his life is enhanced. (See Likutey Moharan II, 78:2)

CLINGING TO HASHEM

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“To love Hashem, your G-d, to obey Him and to cleave to Him; for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land...” (30:20)

Toiling in Torah is the means to cleave and to attach oneself to Hashem. The Zohar (Acharei Mos) tells us: “The Holy One blessed be He, Torah and Yisrael are all one.” This feeling of closeness and attachment to Hashem is a manifestation of true ahavas Hashem. Not only does a Torah scholar who is totally immersed in Torah feel attached to Hashem, he is living testimony of Hashem’s existence.

Rav Baruch Ber Leibowitz zt’l, the rosh yeshivah of Kamenitz, traveled to the United States in the late 1920’s to collect desperately needed funds for his yeshivah. During his stay in New York, Mayor Jimmy Walker presented him with the key to the city of New York. At the presentation, Mayor Walker remarked, “Rabbi Leibowitz disproves Darwin’s theory of evolution. A holy person like him could only be created by G-d.” Even the mayor was able to perceive the holiness and sanctity emanating from a righteous man who was totally engrossed in Torah and avodas Hashem.

INCREASING VITALITY

Reb Noson of Breslov

“To love Hashem, your G-d, to obey Him and to cleave to Him; for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land...” (30:20)

Serving G-d is “your life.” It gives you the vitality you need to get through each day. It is truly your lifeline, especially when you renew yourself and your attitude daily. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 63a)

Every soul is rooted in the Torah, from whence it receives its life and vitality. The more a person is attached to the Torah, the greater degree of vitality he brings into his life and days. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 462)

LIVING WITH LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“To love Hashem, your G-d, to obey Him and to cleave to Him; for He is your life and the length of your days, to dwell upon the land...” (30:20)

Realizing that “He is your life,” i.e., that G-d is the force within us that keeps us alive and gives us our zest for living, leads us to love Him. This love replaces the self-love that constitutes our inborn motivation to keep living and improving our lives.

But beyond this, the Torah is telling us here that it is possible for us to love G-d so much that this love becomes our very life, that we live off this love. Loving G-d enables us to cling to Him constantly, and clinging to Him constantly infuses our lives with infinite vitality and purpose. (Sefer HaMa’amarim 5714-5715-5716, p. 148) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

VAYEILECH

OUR INNER MOSHE

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

“Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel...” (31:1)

Why aren’t we told where Moshe went? Because this pasuk implies that Moshe “went into” or entered into the heart of every Jew. Every Jew, in every generation, bears within his or her heart a spark of our teacher, Moshe’s spirit. Thus, the answer to our question may be found at the end of the pasuk. Moshe, we are told, went forth “to all of Israel.”

This, too, is the reason why the Torah says of Moshe that “no one knows his burial place” (36:6). For Moshe is not in an ordinary tomb, rather he is enshrined within every Jew’s heart.

HOLY INFLUENCERS

Reb Menachem Mendel of Rimanov

"Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel..." (31:1)

The Jewish people, leaving Egypt and traveling in the desert, had beliefs and attitudes that were faulty. Their inner thoughts were tainted to the extent that even when they were convinced in their belief in Hashem they faltered, as evidenced by the incident of the golden calf.

Therefore, Hashem planted Moshe in their midst to become "the composite intelligence of Israel." Thus, it became possible for the "generation of the Exodus" to become known as the "enlightened generation." In this way, they were able to develop the understanding to learn how to lead a proper life.

The same occurs in every generation. There arise personalities of stature with the capacity to perform the will of Hashem and the ability to "speak these words to all of Israel" to influence them.

PRAY RIGHT AWAY

Rav Eliyahu Lopian

"I [Moshe] am 120 years old today; I cannot any longer go forth and return..." (31:2)

Chazal tell us that if Moshe had prayed immediately, Hashem would have allowed him to enter Eretz Yisrael. We learn from this that we should not put off praying when a need arises. Rather, we should pray immediately.

COMFORTING OTHERS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"I [Moshe] am 120 years old today; I cannot any longer go forth and return..." (31:2)

Rav Mordechai Gifter would often recall the time he was traveling on an airplane, and the pilot announced that one of the engines had exploded and that everyone should brace themselves for a crash-landing. Thankfully, the plane landed safely, but despite everyone preparing themselves for the worst, related Rav Gifter, one man sitting nearby insisted on enjoying one last drink of coke before his anticipated death.

Moshe too was forewarned about his imminent demise and prepared himself accordingly. How so? One would have thought that he would have taught more Torah to the Jewish People or sought to gain more understanding of Hashem in those final few hours. However, the Ibn Ezra (Devarim 31:1) tells us that Moshe spent his remaining time visiting each tribe to console and strengthen them due to his upcoming death. This is just one example of Moshe's selfless care for his people which forms the bedrock of his tenure as leader - always determining the true needs of the Jewish People and putting them above his own.

In fact, the Medrash (Mishlei 14:34) writes that Moshe's superior attribute of kindness toward the Jewish People is the defining reason that he will merit to return to lead the Jewish People after the final redemption.

Such is the value that Hashem places on one who cares for His children. Indeed, the Mesillas Yesharim (Chap. 19) writes that Hashem's love for someone is directly proportionate to how much this person loves his fellow Jew!

We see from here how important it is to improve our level of care and concern for others, and how cherished it is by Hashem. Therefore, let us all take a look around and see what we can do to comfort and encourage those who need.

STRENGTH FROM HUMILITY

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"I [Moshe] am 120 years old today; I cannot any longer go forth and return..." (31:2)

Rashi notes: "'I cannot any longer go forth and return' - in words of Torah. This teaches us that the transmitted wellsprings of knowledge became sealed off (to Moshe)."

This is hard to fathom since Moshe had yet to give Klal Yisrael the mitzvah of Hakhel, after which he composed the shirah of Ha'azinu, and then blessed the nation before his death. This seems to clearly indicate that no sources of wisdom had been closed; on the contrary, all such sources retained their full strength for him!

Chacham Dovid Pinto shlit'a suggests that Moshe was the most humble of men as well as a great leader, to the extent that on his day of death, instead of occupying himself with his personal affairs and spiritual state - "Vayeilech Moshe" - he went from one place to another, from one person to another, to take care of the needs of the community - material and spiritual alike. He wanted to speak with each person to encourage him to follow the right path and he did not consider it an affront to his honor to do so.

Consequently, even though the sources of wisdom may have been closed for Moshe, his humility pushed him to go from person to person in order to bring them closer to Torah. He taught them to love others, as well as the mitzvah of Hakhel, which follows the shemittah year (which is also connected to humility) all right before his death, to impart this important lesson for generations to come.

From Moshe Rabbeinu, the Jewish People learn just how the middah of humility can affect a person. Although Moshe had lost his strength and wisdom, his humility had given him back these qualities, to the point that he wrote the entire Torah, composed a poem for Bnei Yisrael, and he blessed them before his death.

No decree can stand against humility and self-effacement. As with all great character traits, humility is applicable to all men in every generation.

THE POWER OF DESIRE

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"...and Hashem said to me, 'You shall not pass this Yarden...'" (31:2)

The Gemara (Sotah 14a) relates that Moshe was desperate to be allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael in order to perform the mitzvos there. So much so, writes the Daas Zekeinim, that he was willing to relinquish his role as leader to Yehoshua and faithfully serve him as a student just as Yehoshua had done for Moshe until now. Amazingly, Hashem allowed this to take place, and Moshe spared no time running to Yehoshua's tent to fulfill his duties. After attending to Yehoshua, they both went to the Ohel Moed so that Yehoshua could speak to Hashem, after which Moshe then turned to Yehoshua to ask what Hashem had said. Yehoshua replied that Moshe was no longer in a position to hear everything that Hashem had told him.

Upon realizing that he had lost the close relationship with Hashem and was now not privy to understanding His Will in a direct way, Moshe could not bear the pain and declared that it would indeed be better that he moved on to the Next World instead of succumbing to such agonizing jealousy (31:1).

This eye-opening narrative teaches us so many lessons. One of them is Moshe's intense desire for a closeness with Hashem. Perhaps this is what made him such a great leader in the first place, as Rav Chaim Shmuelevits once related when asked what makes a true Torah leader. Answering the question, Rav Chaim recalled when he was a young boy visiting his uncle, the Rosh Yeshivah of Navordok, he asked his uncle who the best boys in the yeshivah were. The Rosh Yeshivah pointed to one boy and said, "He is the most diligent." He then pointed to two others, "This one is the most knowledgeable; and this one has the greatest fear of Heaven... But who is the very best?" asked Rav Chaim. "The very best is in a different league; it is that boy over there. He is not the most diligent, nor the most knowledgeable, nor possesses the greatest fear of Heaven, but he has the biggest desire to get close to Hashem and understand His Torah, and that makes him guaranteed to succeed." Who was this young man? The Steipler, who did indeed grow up to be one of the generation's greatest Torah leaders.

We see from here that it is not our natural talent that will bring us success in Torah, rather it is our ambition and drive to succeed. If our desire to learn Hashem's Torah and understand His ways fills our mind, then surely, we too will be destined for greatness.

AUSPICIOUS TIMES

Chasam Sofer

"I [Moshe] am 120 years old today; I cannot any longer go forth and return." (31:2)

Rashi comments that Moshe was saying. "Today my days and years have been filled. On this day I was born, on this day I shall die." Our Sages said that Haman chose the month of Adar to do harm to the Jews because that was the month that Moshe died. He did not realize that he had also been born in that month.

If centuries later Haman felt that Moshe's death was a bad sign for the Jews, then at the time of Moshe's death the Jews must have felt that waging war with the enemy would also be a bad idea. Therefore, Moshe told the Jews that he was also born in that month. He said to them (Devarim 31:6), "Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid."

FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

Tiferes Shlomo

"And Hashem will deliver them [the nations] up before you, and you shall deal with them in accordance with all the commandment that I have commanded you..." (31:5)

When you execute vengeance on the seven nations of Canaan, you shall do it not for the sake of selfish gain and thirst for revenge but solely for Heaven's sake, because I, G-d, have commanded you to do it.

OUR SOURCE OF STRENGTH

Chacham Dovid Pardo

"Be courageous and bold, do not fear and do not quake before them; for Hashem, your G-d, it is He Who is going with you; He will not loosen [His hold on] you, nor will He abandon you." (31:6)

Can we possibly fathom that Hashem will make us weak or abandon us? However, if a person truly recognizes that Hashem goes with him at all times and will never forsake him, then this will infuse him with strength - not just mentally and emotionally, but even physically.

Moshe Rabbeinu had this spirit and was strong and healthy till his very end. Dovid HaMelech was the same. Why? Because Hashem is the source of all strength.

UNBREAKABLE BOND

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Be courageous and bold, do not fear and do not quake before them; for Hashem, your G-d, it is He Who is going with you; He will not loosen [His hold on] you, nor will He abandon you." (31:6)

Moshe informed us with these words that even if it would occur to us that life would be easier if we were free from both G-d's mission and His assistance, such a life is not possible. G-d will never forsake us. We can never completely silence the inner voice that urges us to discard our infatuation with superficial pursuits and assume the mantle of responsible Jewishness.

For this same reason, we should never feel incapable of fulfilling our Divine mission. The same G-d who refuses to leave us alone, always prodding us to join Him in perfecting the world, stands at our side to assist us in our efforts to transform the world into His home. (Sichot Kodesh 5732, vol. 1, p. 9) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

TO EACH THEIR OWN

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“He will not loosen [His hold on] you, nor will He abandon you...” And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous...’” (31:6-7)

Moshe tells the nation that G-d will deliver the land to them and charges the nation to be strong and courageous because G-d “Goes with you. He will neither fail you nor forsake you” (31:6). Moshe later instructs Yehoshua to “be strong and courageous” (31:7), but without the assurances that followed the charge for the nation. Why would the nation’s charge to be strong and courageous be different from that of their leader?

Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that leaders and teachers and followers and students require different types of strengths. Teachers can’t despair even when they think their words have no effect. Likewise, students need to trust in their leaders and not be discouraged when they don’t completely understand their reasoning.

Following requires both adherence to the rules and faith in the end result, but ultimate success is guaranteed to all who have proper trust in leadership and faith in G-d’s vision.

ACCORDING TO THE TIMES

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him... ‘you will come with this people to the Land that Hashem swore to their forefathers...’” (31:7)

G-d’s Torah and His commandments are eternal and unchanging, but the way they must be made relevant and applied in each generation changes as time progresses.

In order to ensure that we live life in accordance with G-d’s wishes, G-d Himself has authorized the rabbinic leaders of each generation to apply the Torah’s teachings to the unique circumstances of their generation.

Therefore, when today’s rabbinic authorities apply the Torah’s teachings in innovative ways, we cannot try to live in the past, complaining that the leadership of previous generations did not see the need for such innovations.

On the contrary; only by reading the Torah through the eyes of our “Yehoshua” - today’s Moshe - can we be certain that the Torah will provide us with the inspiration to fulfill our Divine mission and live our lives to the fullest. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 19, p. 314) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

STRONG AND HUMBLE

Meshech Chochmah

“And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous...’” (31:7)

The melody to which this parshah is usually chanted links the phrase “in the sight of all of Israel” with “be strong and courageous.”

This teaches us how a king or leader in Israel must conduct himself in public. Two basic qualities are required of a king in Israel:

He must be humble in his heart; he “must not lift up his heart above his brother.” To the outside, on the other hand, he must project a stern front. He must guard his royal prerogatives and not decline any of the honors due him, as it is written: “You shall set a king over you so that his fear shall be upon you.”

As we know, Yehoshua was exceedingly humble. He regarded himself as no more than a servant, making it a practice to sweep the floor of the house of study and arrange the seats there in proper order (see Targum Yonason to Bamidbar 13:16, “And Moshe called Hoshea the son of Nun, Yehoshua” - “on account of Yehoshua’s humility”).

Now that Yehoshua was about to become a leader and ruler in Israel, Moshe said to him: Be humble in your own heart, but “in the sight of all of Israel, be strong and courageous.” In front of the Jews, don’t reveal your humility; show only your strength and determination.

BASED ON THEIR NEEDS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous for you will come with this people to the Land that Hashem swore to their forefathers to give them, and you will cause them to inherit it...’” (31:7)

Moshe summons Yehoshua as he takes over the leadership of the nation and tells him to “be strong and courageous” when he brings the people to the land that G-d has promised to their forefathers (31:7). The Hebrew words used in this pasuk literally mean “You will come with this nation.” Why is this wording not consistent with the intention for Yehoshua to lead the nation into the land?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks posits that leadership comes in different forms. Moshe’s task, as leader, was to take the Jews out of Egypt, so he needed to be firm, decisive, and action oriented. Moshe wasn’t anyone’s friend; he did what needed to be done. Yehoshua, on the other hand, had to be much more democratic. His assignment was to lead a new nation into a new land with unfamiliar challenges, requiring cooperation and coordination from many people. He was participatory and engaging and had to get buy-in from leadership and citizens alike.

The roles we play in life are not only dictated by our talents and skills but by the needs of those we encounter and interact with. Recognizing their collective strengths, weaknesses, and needs can ensure that we positively impact those around us.

SOURCE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous for you will come with this people to the Land...’” (31:7)

Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman asks a very interesting question based on this verse: Hashem has already promised that He will bring the Jewish People into Eretz Yisrael, so if Yehoshua was still frightened, how would Moshe’s words help to encourage him when Hashem’s own promise was not enough to calm his fears?

Rav Shteinman answers simply that we see from here that every word of encouragement does help. Whatever the circumstances, support and encouragement from someone else can turn everything around.

MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous for you will come with this people to the Land that Hashem swore to their forefathers to give them, and you will cause them to inherit it...’” (31:7)

This verse describes the moment when Moshe was about to appoint Yehoshua as his successor. The Gemara (Bava Basra 75a) tells us that when Moshe and Yehoshua were together, the Elders of the generation would say, “The face of Moshe is like the face of the sun, whereas the face of Yehoshua is like the face of the moon. Oh, the embarrassment. Oh, the shame!”

Many commentators explain that with these words the Elders were describing Yehoshua’s embarrassment that the holy radiance of his face did not reach the level of Moshe. However, Rav Itzele Volozhin explains the Gemara completely differently:

The phrase “Oh, the embarrassment. Oh, the shame” that we previously attributed to the embarrassment of Yehoshua, was in fact said by the Elders in reference to their own embarrassment at not attaining the level of holiness that Yehoshua reached.

Reb Itzele illustrates this with the following analogy:

One day a rich merchant passed through a poor city. In need of workers, he offered the people of the city the opportunity to work for him and he would support anyone who joined him. No one agreed to join the merchant except for one poor man.

After some time, the merchant and his worker returned to the city, and by now they were both very rich. When the worker’s friends saw that their “poor friend” was now very wealthy, they hid their faces in shame.

“Why are you embarrassed in front of me?” he asked. “If it is because of my wealth, my boss is still many times richer than me!”

Shamefaced, his friends replied, “Your boss comes from a family whom Hashem has always blessed with plenty. Why would we paupers, who have lived in poverty all of our lives, be embarrassed because of him? But you, you were once one of us, you were as poor as us, and we had the same chance to become rich that you did. But you took that chance, and we squandered it! That is why we are embarrassed in front of you.”

So too, the Elders were saying to Yehoshua, “It is not for us to be embarrassed in front of Moshe, for his greatness comes from Hashem and cannot be reached by us. But you, Yehoshua, attained greatness because of your dedication to Moshe at every moment. For this we are embarrassed because we too had the opportunity to achieve greatness like yours, but we squandered our chance.”

STRONG AND HUMBLE

Meshech Chochmah

“And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous...’” (31:7)

The melody to which this parshah is usually chanted links the phrase “in the sight of all of Israel” with “be strong and courageous.”

This teaches us how a king or leader in Israel must conduct himself in public. Two basic qualities are required of a king in Israel:

He must be humble in his heart; he “must not lift up his heart above his brother.”

To the outside, on the other hand, he must project a stern front. He must guard his royal prerogatives and not decline any of the honors due him, as it is written: “You shall set a king over you so that his fear shall be upon you.”

As we know, Yehoshua was exceedingly humble. He regarded himself as no more than a servant, making it a practice to sweep the floor of the house of study and arrange the seats there in proper order (see Targum Yonason to Bamidbar 13:16, “And Moshe called Hoshea the son of Nun, Yehoshua” - “on account of Yehoshua’s humility”).

Now that Yehoshua was about to become a leader and ruler in Israel, Moshe said to him: Be humble in your own heart, but “in the sight of all of Israel, be strong and courageous.” In front of the Jews, don’t reveal your humility; show only your strength and determination.

BASED ON THEIR NEEDS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“And Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous for you will come with this people to the Land that Hashem swore to their forefathers to give them, and you will cause them to inherit it...” (31:7)

Moshe summons Yehoshua as he takes over the leadership of the nation and tells him to “be strong and courageous” when he brings the people to the land that G-d has promised to their forefathers (31:7). The Hebrew words used in this pasuk literally mean “You will come with this nation.” Why is this wording not consistent with the intention for Yehoshua to lead the nation into the land?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks posits that leadership comes in different forms. Moshe’s task, as leader, was to take the Jews out of Egypt, so he needed to be firm, decisive, and action oriented. Moshe wasn’t anyone’s friend; he did what needed to be done. Yehoshua, on the other hand, had to be much more democratic. His assignment was to lead a new nation into a new land with unfamiliar challenges, requiring cooperation and coordination from many people. He was participatory and engaging and had to get buy-in from leadership and citizens alike.

The roles we play in life are not only dictated by our talents and skills but by the needs of those we encounter and interact with. Recognizing their collective strengths, weaknesses, and needs can ensure that we positively impact those around us.

UNITED DIVERSITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Moshe wrote down this Torah and gave it to the priests, the Levites, who carried the Ark of the Covenant of G-d, and to all the elders of Israel.” (31:9)

There is only one Torah; its lessons apply equally to all of us and we are all equally obligated in its laws. Nevertheless, Moshe wrote a copy of the Torah for each tribe, recognizing that each tribe, both due to its hereditary qualities and due to the unique environment in which it would settle, would develop its own sub-culture within the general culture of the Jewish people.

This flowering of the Jewish people into unique sub-cultures is reflected in today’s various Jewish communities - Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Yemenite, and so on. This celebration of diversity is a beautiful phenomenon, reflecting how G-d’s oneness expresses itself in infinite ways.

The underlying unity behind this diversity was reflected in the Torah scroll that Moshe wrote for the Levites. This scroll was kept in the Temple, and all subsequently written scrolls had to conform to that authoritative copy.

We can learn from this to cherish both sides of the dichotomy: to celebrate our own culture while always remaining true to the underlying unity that is sourced in G-d’s Torah. (Hitva’aduyot 5742, vol. 1, pp. 9-10, 20-21) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

ASSEMBLIES OF FAITH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“When all Israel comes to appear before G-d, in the place He will choose, you must read this Torah before all Israel, so they hear...” (31:11)

The objective of this assembly was to strengthen the foundations of Jewish education and observance. We can thus fulfill this commandment nowadays firstly by “assembling” all the various facets of our personalities in order to imbue them with the knowledge and reverence of G-d. Next, we should assemble our families periodically and strengthen each other in a spirit of family love and camaraderie.

Finally, we should assemble whatever groups of people we can - whether at work, at school, in our synagogues, our extended families, our wider circle of friends, etc. - in order to influence as many people as possible to enhance their commitment to the Torah’s values and lifestyle, as based on the love and awe of G-d.

Fulfilling this commandment to the greatest extent possible will elicit G-d’s reciprocal response, and He will enable us to finally fulfill it in its optimal fashion, in the rebuilt holy Temple, as we listen to the Torah read to us by the ultimate Jewish king, Mashiach. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 34, pp. 211-216) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

KING OF YOURSELF

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“When all Israel comes to appear before G-d, in the place He will choose, you must read this Torah before all Israel, so they hear...” (31:11)

We are all required to appoint a metaphorical “king” over ourselves, i.e., a spiritual counselor responsible for ensuring that we stay firmly on the path of spiritual growth. This king’s primary responsibility is to “read to us” - i.e., inculcate us with - the same passages from the Torah that the real king reads to the people at the septennial assembly.

The first passage that the king reads (Devarim 6:4-9) focuses on accepting “the yoke of the kingdom of heaven,” i.e., submitting to G-d’s authority. The second passage (Devarim 11:13-21) teaches us that material success is dependent upon heeding G-d’s commands. Keeping these two lessons in the forefront of our consciousness is the key to continued spiritual growth. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 24, p. 106) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

TEACHING UNITY

Imrei Emes

"...you shall read this Torah before all Israel, in their ears. Assemble the people..." (31:11-12)

Shouldn't the command to "assemble the people" have gone before the command to "read this Torah"?

The commands were deliberately put in what seems to be reverse order, since the meaning of this pasuk is as follows: "You shall read this Torah"; you shall read to them the law that teaches us to "assemble the people." When Jews dwell together in unity, that in itself is a manifestation of Torah.

MUTUAL BENEFIT

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Assemble the people - the men and the women and the children..." (31:12)

The Mishnah (Sukkah 28a) relates a story that when Shammai's daughter-in-law gave birth to a baby boy, Shammai removed a portion of the roof under which the newborn slept and placed s'chach on the opening so that the infant would be inside a sukkah. Many commentators wonder about this (Otzar Mefarshai HaTalmud brings a list of authorities who grapple with it) and question what the great Shammai sought to accomplish by doing this. What could the newborn child derive from the fact that he technically was "sleeping in a sukkah"? As we know, a minor is not obligated in mitzvos. Rather, his or her parents are obligated to train their child to lead a life of Torah and mitzvos after his bar mitzvah. Accordingly, we must determine what precisely Shammai was seeking to impart to his infant grandson.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt'l (Reshimot Shivrim) cites the ceremony of Hakhel as a precedent for Shammai. The Torah issues a command to the entire congregation of Klal Yisrael to gather in the Beis HaMikdash during the festival of Sukkos of the post-shemittah year for the Hakhel ceremony. Explicitly, the pasuk mentions that every man, woman and child is to attend this magnificent event. The Ramban understands the teachings of Chazal (Chagigah 3a) that even infants should be brought to Hakhel in order to gain merit for those [parents] who bring them. In the same vein, R' Soloveitchik suggests that the newborn baby sleeping in his crib with s'chach over his head did not actually benefit from being in a sukkah. Shammai, however, did benefit by gaining merit for constructing a sukkah for his infant grandchild.

This insight teaches us a vital lesson in the Torah outlook towards chinuch. Chinuch has the potential to benefit not only the child, but also the educator (i.e. the parents). In fact, Chazal express this point by recording the observation of the great Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, who said (Makkos 10a): "I have learned much from my teachers, and even more from my colleagues; but I learned [gained] the most from my students."

BESTOWING REWARDS

Kotzker Rebbe

"Assemble the people - the men and the women and the children and the strangers in your communities - that they may hear and so learn to revere Hashem, your God..." (31:12)

Why was it necessary to state that the children were to go with the parents? Shouldn't it be obvious that the parents were not going to leave the children by themselves?

The Talmud explains that the parents were specifically told to bring the children, so that the parents would be given a reward for their adherence.

ACCORDING TO THE EFFORT

Sefas Emes

"Assemble the people - the men and the women and the children and the strangers in your communities - that they may hear and so learn to revere Hashem, your God..." (31:12)

When parents exert themselves to bring their children to the Holy Temple, they show their willingness to maintain their Jewishness and listen to the words of Torah.

This action is justification for Hashem to give the reward that their children should be influenced by Torah and grow as productive Jews. Hashem gives the same proportion of aid in the education of their children as the effort given by the parents.

CREATING POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"Assemble the people - the men and the women and the children and the strangers in your communities - that they may hear and so learn to revere Hashem, your God..." (31:12)

Moshe introduces the mitzvah of hakhel (assembly), where every seven years, all men, women, and children assemble, and the king reads the Torah (31:12). While of course it makes sense for men and women to be there, why would children be required to attend? If anything, their presence would likely distract from the experience as parents struggle to control their young children.

Surprisingly, the Lekach Tov suggests that the children's attendance is not only not distracting but, in fact, essential for creating a positive experience for the entire family unit, especially the younger members. As the pasuk continues, "So that they hear and learn and fear G-d" (31:12).

The first step of an experience is simply being there, even before we learn anything. Once we are old enough to comprehend, learning and revering follows. Creating positive experiences for our children to enjoy will lead to increased engagement and enhanced commitment down the road.

DISSEMINATING HOLINESS

Rebbe Nachman

"Hashem said to Moshe: 'Behold, your days are drawing near to die; summon Yehoshua, and present yourselves in the Tent of Meeting, that I may instruct him...' (31:14)

The Hebrew letter aleph (א) consists of an upper point, a lower point, and a center line. Moshe represents the upper point of the aleph; his disciple, Yehoshua, represents the lower point; and the Tent of Meeting corresponds to the center line, which joins the two points together.

At the time of a tzaddik's passing, he loses the authority to illuminate others with his daat (knowledge of G-d). But G-d sees to it that his disciples continue to illuminate the tzaddik's teachings in this world. Thus, "G-d said to Moshe" - in order for your illuminating light (the upper point) to continue shining - "summon Yehoshua" - your light must be directed into the lower point. "Stand with him in the Tent of Meeting" - a channel must be created to filter the light downwards. This is accomplished by "I will instruct him" - by returning authority to G-d. (See Likutey Moharan I, 6:8)

NO ROOM FOR JEALOUSY

The Rabbi of Ostrowicze

"Hashem said to Moshe: 'Behold, your days are drawing near to die; summon Yehoshua, and present yourselves in the Tent of Meeting, that I may instruct him...' (31:14)

When the pillar of cloud vanished, Moshe went to Yehoshua and asked: "What did the oracle say to you?" And Yehoshua said to Moshe: "When the oracle was revealed to you, I used to know (without asking) what it had told you." At that moment Moshe cried out: "Better one hundred deaths than one (moment of) jealousy!" (Midrash Rabbah)

How could Moshe possibly have felt jealous of Yehoshua, particularly since one is usually not jealous of one's disciples, as the Sages say: "One can be jealous of anyone except one's son and one's disciple."

In order to mitigate Moshe's grief at his impending death, G-d deliberately planted a little jealousy in his heart. When Moshe realized this, he cried out in dismay: All my life I labored to cultivate virtues. Now I find that I am afflicted with the vice of jealousy. I would rather die than go on living with this fault! "Better a hundred deaths than one (moment of) jealousy."

STRENGTHENING OUR BOND

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"And I shall conceal My face from them, and they will be for consuming... and they will say on that day, 'Look! Because my G-d is not with me did these evils happen to me.'" (31:17)

The purpose of life is to be connected to Hashem. Every aliyah (ascent) and yeridah (descent) of a person's life is connected to the attribute of deveikus (attachment). No matter what a Jew does, he is either attaching himself to Hashem or detaching himself from Him. The most important thought that a Jew must have before he does any act is to determine if it will bring him closer to or further from Hashem.

Similarly, says the Nesivos Shalom, Rav Shalom Noach Berezovsky zt'l, all the tests and tribulations in life are not necessarily a punishment for impure desires or thoughts of heresy, but rather the yetzer hara puts in front of a person trials of both body and mind, until it appears as if he is being pushed away from Hashem and his prayers are not being heard because he has become unwanted in His eyes. It is as if an iron wall has gone up between him and his Father in Heaven. This is the most difficult tribulation of all, and a Jew must employ every tactic of kedushah to strengthen his belief in Hashem even more.

"As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I do not fear evil for You are with me" (Tehillim 23:4). The understanding of any nisayon is to determine the strength of one's connection to the Ribono shel Olam. If his deveikus to Hashem is permanent, then this temporary trial will not break his bond.

ALWAYS WITH US

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

"...and they will say on that day, 'Look! Because my G-d is not with me did these evils happen to me'... And I will surely hide My face on that day..." (31:17-18)

This is perplexing. In the first pasuk, it's clear to the person speaking that his suffering was caused by the lack of Hashem's presence in his life. Why then would Hashem punish him further by continuing to hide His face?

Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa explained that this is a fundamental mistake. Hashem never left him. Hashem is always watching over him. Thinking that Hashem was not with him - that was his sin. One must recognize that even when he sins and is "walking in the valley of the shadow of death," Hashem is always with him.

HIDDEN YET NEAR

Baal Shem Tov

"And I will surely hide My face on that day..." (31:18)

The term "hiding" generally implies that one does not know where the other person is. However, if one knows that the person is on the other side of the obstacle, and he merely cannot see him, he is not truly hidden.

Thus, when Hashem tells us, "I will surely hide My face on that day," He is encouraging us for He is saying: "Even though I am not visible, I am standing close by."

The emphasis implied by the repetition of “hide” indicates that the concealment of G-d’s presence in this world is itself concealed. In other words, when the spiritual darkness grows too powerful, you stop realizing that it is darkness, and you can, G-d forbid, mistake it for goodness and light.

Imagine yourself at the base of a spiral staircase. Look up, see the image at its very top. Start ascending, keeping an eye on that final destination. As you proceed, a supporting pillar blocks your view. In truth, you have moved closer than before, but because your destination has suddenly disappeared from your sight, you might think you are at a greater distance from your destination.

Do not be fooled. Between one achievement and the next, you must move around a pole that produces momentary obstructions of vision, but as long as you are climbing, you are moving closer, not further.

NEVER ALONE

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“Now, write this song for yourselves...” (31:19)

The Torah commands us to write a Sefer Torah; this is the last mitzvah recorded in the Torah. The Chofetz Chaim points out that this commandment comes immediately after the previous pasuk that shares that at times Hashem conceals Himself from us. We are all aware that although Hashem continues to work behind the scenes, there are times when He hides Himself from our view.

The Chofetz Chaim explains that the Torah is teaching us through the sequence of these two pesukim - the first regarding Hashem’s concealment, and the second stating the obligation to write a Sefer Torah - that although there may be situations in life where we are struggling and may have trouble seeing the Yad Hashem, we always have the Torah and Hashem to protect us. Hashem, in His infinite kindness, does not leave us to figure things out for ourselves. Rather, He provides us with an instruction manual to help us navigate the challenging and difficult situations that we confront in our lives.

This insight of the Chofetz Chaim is powerful. We must remind ourselves that the Torah and Hashem’s guiding hand are always present, and they will no doubt provide the ever-needed chizuk and strength that we all so desperately desire and rely on.

WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE

Malbim

“...so this song may be a witness for Me against the Children of Israel.” (31:19)

Why does G-d require a witness for Himself? Actually, this song is intended to serve as a witness for the Jewish people. G-d did not require the song as a “witness” to testify “against the Children of Israel” but only as a “witness” in their defense.

What is actually meant may be explained by the following parable: A certain king freed his servant from prison and appointed him guard of his treasures. Knowing that the servant had once been imprisoned for theft, the king worried that the man may be tempted to commit theft again. A second offense of this sort carried the death penalty. The king, therefore, entered into his record book that the servant had once been guilty of theft. The members of the royal household thought that the king had made the entry to remind the servant that if he were to commit another theft his punishment would be twice as severe as the one he had been given for his first offense. The fact, however, was that the king had made this entry not as a warning to his servant but as a personal reminder for himself not to deal too harshly with the servant in case he should repeat the offense. For, after all, the king had given the man this position of trust even though he knew that the servant was a habitual thief.

Similarly, G-d took this song as “a witness for Me.” It was to remind Him not to judge the people of Israel too harshly when they sinned. For, after all, G-d, had chosen Israel to be His People even though He had known their nature (“for I knew their imagination”; 31:21) and their propensity to sin.

LIVING IN HARMONY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“Now, write this song for yourselves and teach it to the people. Place it in their mouth, so this song may be a witness for Me against the Children of Israel...” (31:19)

G-d tells Moshe to enter the Mishkan with Yehoshua and tells them both that the Jews will abandon G-d, that He will hide His face from the people, and that they will be subjected to many troubles. G-d then tells Moshe and Yehoshua, “Write for yourselves this song and teach it to the people. Place it in their mouths so that the song will be a witness for the people” (31:19). We discover that the song referenced in this parashah is composed only in the next parashah. While describing the many difficulties that will befall the Jews, why does G-d mention the concept now when the song itself won’t be introduced until later? Also, how can a song help people through their hardships?

Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr explains that a song includes the concept of harmony, where multiple sounds come together in unison and in a pleasing way. The metaphor is meant to comfort people as they struggle through difficult times with the understanding that, like sounds in a song, all events in our lives are intended to guide us toward the best possible outcome.

As we face challenges in life, it helps to know that we are not alone, that we have each other, and ultimately G-d to help us. Just as Moshe and Yehoshua seamlessly worked together to transition authority and leadership, we can use each other to navigate life with friendship, cooperation, and harmony.

TORAH-FILLED HOME

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Now, write this song for yourselves and teach it to the people. Place it in their mouth, so this song may be a witness for Me against the Children of Israel...” (31:19)

This verse alludes to the commandment to write a Torah scroll and study from it (Mishneh Torah, Tefillin u’Mezuzah v’Sefer Torah 7:1; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dei’ah 270:1).

The Torah has already enjoined us to study and memorize its words (Devarim 6:6); the additional commandment to write a Torah scroll (or have one written, or purchase one) is intended to ensure that we have the means by which to study the Torah easily, fully, and accurately.

Before the Oral Torah was written down - i.e., when it was studied from memory - this commandment applied only to the Torah scroll; nowadays, it applies to the texts of the entire Written Torah (the Tanach) and Oral Torah (the Talmud and the Codes of Jewish Law). When we fill our homes with holy books, making G-d’s instructions for us readily available to study and fulfill, G-d considers it as if we ourselves stood at Mount Sinai and received the Torah directly from Him. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 23, pp. 17-26) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

NEAR AND DEAR

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“When they encounter many evils and troubles, this song shall serve as testimony before them as witness - for it shall never be forgotten from the lips of their progeny, because I know their inclination, what it does today, before I bring them into the land that I have sworn.” (31:21)

The phrase “for it will not be forgotten from the mouths of their offspring” is G-d’s assurance that we will never forget the poem that constitutes the greater part of the following parashah (Ha’azinu), and indeed, that we will never forget the Torah in general.

Furthermore, inasmuch as the Torah is our guide for maintaining and enhancing our relationship with G-d, this phrase is also a promise that we will never “forget” our relationship with G-d, i.e., this relationship will always remain available to us.

The way that we realize this promise is alluded to in the first word of the poem, Ha’azinu, which means “listen from nearby.” When we keep the Torah’s message near to our hearts, making it easy and natural for us to fulfill its directives, G-d assures us that the Torah will always remain relevant to us, that we will always feel close to Him. We will know our purpose in life and fulfill it successfully, and G-d’s material and spiritual blessings will accompany us in all that we do. (Sichot Kodesh 5735, vol. 2, pp. 496-497) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

FOR ALL ETERNITY

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“This song shall serve as testimony before them as witness - for it shall never be forgotten from the lips of their progeny.” (31:21)

The transmission of Torah from generation to generation is not merely a Jewish legacy handed down from father to son. Not every father knows how to hand it down and not every son knows how to accept and incorporate the concepts contained within. Rather, it is the promise of “כי לא תשכח מפי זרעו” - “For it will never be forgotten from the lips of their progeny,” that serves to sustain Klal Yisrael all throughout the long exile, with the rich heritage of Torah and mitzvos.

Today we see the realization of this promise clearly, says R’ Yaakov Horowitz shlit’a, by looking at the aftermath of the Holocaust. Broken and bereft survivors attempted to rebuild their shattered lives. With great sacrifice, they sent their children to learn in cheder. Because of the circumstances, the schools were often sub-par, staffed with teachers who were incapable of relating to their students. Amazingly enough, for the most part, they succeeded! The second generation of Jews after the war became learned individuals who created the religious atmosphere and lifestyle we enjoy today. This could only be due to the promise of lo sishakach.

ALWAYS THERE FOR US

Reb Noson of Breslov

“This song shall serve as testimony before them as witness - for it shall never be forgotten from the lips of their progeny.” (31:21)

Even when the Jews sin and forget the Torah, the Torah does not forget them. It will always be there for the Jews and will eventually bring them back to G-d. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 185b)

Why do we celebrate on the yahrtzeit of a tzaddik, rather than cry over our loss? Our joy expresses the truism that the Torah and teachings of the tzaddik remain with us. Using his strength, we can overcome all adversity. Thus, on the seventh of Adar (the yahrtzeit of Moshe) and on Lag Ba’Omer (the yahrtzeit of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai), there is great rejoicing. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 274)

REFUSED TO BE FORGOTTEN

Rebbe Nachman

“This song shall serve as testimony before them as witness - for it shall never be forgotten from the lips of their progeny...” (31:21)

Pondering the intensification of the Roman oppression and the impending stages of exile, the Sages declared:

“The Torah will one day be forgotten by the Jews.” But Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai declared that the Torah would never be forgotten, citing this verse as a proof-text. (Shabbat 138b)

Rabbi Shimon’s citation of the present verse was not incidental. The final letters of the words *ki lo tishakhach m’pi zaro* (כי לא תשכח מפי זרעו, since it will not be forgotten from the lips of their progeny) spell Yochai (יוחאי), indicating that through Yochai - i.e., Rabbi Shimon - the Torah will not be forgotten.

In making this promise, Rabbi Shimon stood alone against the leading sages of his time. But he was correct. And, furthermore, in the merit of the Zohar, which Rabbi Shimon revealed, the Jews will eventually leave the exile (Zohar III, 124b). (See Likutey Moharan I, Preface)

SONG OF TORAH

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“Moshe wrote this song on that day, and he taught it to the Children of Israel...” (31:22)

Parashas Vayeilech recounts the last days of Moshe’s life. After G-d tells Moshe to designate Yehoshua as his successor, He tells Moshe to write a “song” and teach it to the Jewish people so that the song will be a witness for them (31:19). Moshe writes the song with Yehoshua’s help (according to Rav Hirsch). Why is Moshe instructed to teach in song form, and why do we need to know that Moshe taught the song to the people (31:22)?

Rav Hirsch clarifies that both the song and the teaching aspects of these instructions were given specifically for the benefit of Yehoshua, the future leader of the Jewish people. The way information is conveyed affects how it is absorbed, and songs and poems make it easier to see the beauty within the words. Once the proper medium of education was established, Yehoshua had to learn how to teach.

For knowledge to last, it is not enough to absorb information but to understand the spirit behind the letter of the Torah law and discover its beauty and brilliance. By studying and examining the Torah, we can learn not only its laws, but we can also extract the beauty behind them - such that they sound like music to us and to those we teach.

BEARING WITNESS

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“Gather to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, and I will speak these words into their ears and call upon heaven and earth to bear witness against them.” (31:28)

After Moshe completed the writing of the Sefer Torah, he requested that the Leviim gather the elders to remind them to be loyal to Hashem. He states that heaven and earth will bear witness to that which he will proclaim.

The Chiddushei HaRim offers an alternative explanation that is very powerful. He explains that Moshe was asking Bnei Yisrael to serve as witnesses for He Who created heaven and earth. In other words, Moshe was challenging Klal Yisrael to assume the responsibility of publicizing to the world that Hashem is the Creator of, and in control of, our world. Moshe was communicating that Klal Yisrael is to serve as a light unto the nations in order to bring honor to Hashem.

The Chiddushei HaRim is reminding us that being a Jew is a tremendous privilege that comes with great responsibility. We are expected to serve as the ambassadors of Hashem and ensure, through our behaviors and actions, that we can accurately bear witness to Hashem’s existence in our world. As the Yomim Noraim rapidly approach, let’s guarantee that we act in a way that brings nachas and honor to Hashem.

HAFTARAH

OUR FORGIVING KING

Kochav M’Yaakov

“Return, O Israel, to Hashem, your G-d...” (Hoshea 14:2)

If one says that one will carry one’s case as far as the king’s own throne chamber, it means that one has no chance of acquittal at the lower courts. Since one is guilty according to the law of the land, the only hope lies in obtaining a hearing from the king himself who has the right to pardon even those whose guilt has been established beyond a reasonable doubt.

The prophet Hoshea says: “Return, O Israel, to Hashem, your G-d”: You can come only to Hashem, your G-d, with your repentance; He alone has the power to accept your repentance and to pardon you now, “for you have stumbled in your iniquity.” Your sins were too great for you to have a chance for acquittal in the courts of earthly princes. Only G-d in His mercy can forgive your sins now and, being merciful, He will pardon them even though they were numerous and grave.

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