

פ' נצבים-וילך תשפ"ד ור"ה תשפ"ה

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ACHDUS BEFORE ROSH HASHONO

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

The *Medrash Tanchuma* says on this *possuk*: "When do you all stand? When you are all united", and the Chortkover Rebbe explained this statement on the basis of the Zohar that "this day" refers to *Rosh Hashono* when we all stand before Hashem in judgement. On the Day of Judgement unity is imperative because when *machlokes* reigns everyone is judged individually, and it is then difficult to obtain a favorable judgment, but when there is unity each person is judged as one individual component of the entire nation. This has two advantages. Firstly, the nation is judged with mercy within judgment, and secondly, when unity prevails among the nation individuals can obtain a favorable judgment by virtue of the merits of its righteous members.

Hence, in the days leading up to *Rosh Hashono* it is wise to focus on increasing goodwill and friendship with anyone with whom we interact so that each of us can be counted as individuals of a united nation rather than as disparate members who have negative relationships or no connection to each other.

UNIQUE IMPORTANCE

... your young children, your women... your woodcutters and your water drawers (29:10)

The leaders and elders of the nations were congregated together with simple Jews, and the latter might have thought that they were not worthy of standing together with those great people. Therefore, the previous *possuk* stresses: "You are *all* standing this day...", you are all considered to be great people standing before Me in prayer, each one of you having a unique role to play in this world.

In the days leading up to *Rosh Hashono* one is not allowed to belittle one's own unique importance in the eyes of a Hashem, and this knowledge itself should serve as an impetus to increase one's *avodas Hashem* and *teshuva* during this time of year.

TESHUVAH

Why is Parashas Nitzovim juxtaposed to the curses? Because when the Jews heard these ninety-eight curses [set out in Ki Sova], besides the forty-nine stated in Vayikro (26:14–38), they turned pale and said, "Who can possibly endure these?" Moshe then began to appease them as follows: "You are [all] standing [before Hashem, your G-d] this day; You have provoked Hashem to anger many times, yet He has not made an end to you. Indeed, you still exist before Him. (Rashi on 29:12)

Surely the whole point of the curses was to frighten the Jews and deter them from transgressing, so why did Moshe want to suppress their fear?

Moshe saw that the curses had the effect of frightening them to such an extent that they went pale from fear of Divine punishment. He therefore told them that now they no longer needed to worry about Hashem destroying them, because the fact that they were afraid of Divine punishment would ensure that they would no longer sin, and would therefore not need to be punished.

Moshe was telling them, "'You have provoked Hashem to anger many times, yet He has not made an end to you,' because each time you repented your sins, and that is why 'you still exist before Him.' Therefore, in the future, too, you can avoid the fulfillment of the curses if you will repent any sins."

Whenever a person does *teshuvah* properly, he becomes born anew and is no longer the same person who committed those sins, so that those sins are no longer attributable to him. As a result, any punishments decreed until then no longer apply to him.

Someone who is afraid of the Day of Judgement can indeed rely on Hashem to issue a favorable judgement. In fact, such fear in and of itself has the power of overturning evil decrees because *eimas hadin* has the effect of “sweetening” (being “*mamtik*”) i.e. overturning, or at least mitigating, *dinim* (decrees stemming from the trait of justice).

However, someone who is relaxed because he has not internalized what *Rosh Hashono* is about, cannot rely on false “*bitochon*”, and his lack of concern is rather due to lack of *emuna*.

EYES MORE POWERFUL THAN INTELLECT

And you saw their abominations and their repugnant idols of wood and stone, silver, and gold, which were with them. (29:16)

Rashi notes that these idols were disgusting like crawling insects and dung, and yet the following *possuk* still finds it necessary to warn us not to worship the deities of those nations. The Brisker Rov deduced from this that a person’s nature is to be swept away by whatever catches his eye, even if he knows intellectually that the object is disgusting and repulsive.

He added that even if a *ben Torah*’s *hashkofo* is crystal clear, he should still not look at newspapers and literature with false views, because he will necessarily be influenced by them no matter how much he disagrees intellectually with what he reads.

In this context, although the Brisker Rov greatly praised the actions of Rav Amram Blau who protested the desecration of *Shabbos*, they say that he was still opposed to asking the general public to join demonstrations on *Shabbos*, because he felt that the very act of witnessing acts of *chilul Shabbos* would make them become desensitized to their severity. The *rabbonim* of Jerusalem, on the other hand, were of the opinion that if the protesters acted for the sake of Heaven those sights would not have a negative effect on them.

Similarly, when a resident of Tel Aviv wanted to move to Bnei Brak, his fellow residents complained to the Brisker Rov that his departure would weaken the *chareidi* community in Tel Aviv. The resident’s position was that he had to move for the sake of his children’s education. The Brisker Rov responded that this person had to move not only for the sake of his children, but also for his own sake, since seeing *chilulei Shabbos* as well as other forbidden sights had a detrimental effect on him.

GOLUS

And a later generation, your descendants, who will rise after you, along with the foreigner who comes from a distant land . . . And all the nations will say, “Why did Hashem do so to this land? What is this great rage of fury?” (29:21, 23)

The Brisker Rov explained that only a later generation will be audacious enough to question Hashem’s actions, asking, “Why did Hashem do so?” Earlier generations accepted Hashem’s decrees unquestioningly. We have always suffered persecutions in *galus*, and the Jewish nation always accepted these decrees with faith, realizing that we cannot question Hashem’s attributes since they are beyond our comprehension. We would increase our prayers and repentance until Hashem improved our situation and overturned the decree.

NOT IN HEAVEN

“It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it for us, to tell it to us, so that we can fulfill it?’” (30:12)

The Ramban asks why the Torah says, “it is not in heaven” specifically with regard to the mitzvah of *teshuva*? Rav Chaim Volozhiner explains that every Jew’s actions have an enormous influence on the upper worlds. Every good deed illuminates and reinforces them, whereas every sins

causes destruction. When a person repents, Hashem revives and reconstructs the worlds which that person destroyed when he sinned. That is the depth of Hashem's mercy when He accepts repentance. Not only does He become reconciled with the sinner, but He also amends the damage which he has caused.

According to the strict measure of judgement, a person would have to go up to the upper worlds himself in order to amend the destruction which he brought about and thereby merit repentance, but were this to be a condition for repentance, no one would be able to repent, because it is not possible to do so. Hence, the Torah emphasizes that "*it is not in heaven*", the power of repentance is so great that a person is not required to ascend to the upper worlds in order to amend what he has destroyed.

Moreover, each sin causes *tumah* and spiritual destructive forces to increase in every part of this world, and yet, "*nor is it beyond the sea*": a person does not have to travel to faraway places in order to undo the destructive effect of his sins in those places.

Rather, this thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it: when a person repents, Hashem amends all the damage that his sins produced in heaven and beyond the sea.

NO ESCAPING THE CHOICE

I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse (30:19)

Once the Vilna Gaon asked the Dubna Maggid to rebuke him. At first, the Dubna Maggid refused, saying "who am I to preach to the Gaon, the epitome of Torah fear of heaven", but the Gaon insisted that that is what he wanted, and so the Maggid said to the Gaon: "Why does the Gaon run away from the temptations of the street and remain sitting within the four *amos* of *halocho* day and night? Would it be not be more appropriate to go out to the street and subject himself to temptations in order to vanquish the evil inclination? Little wonder that the Gaon turned out to be what he is when he remains within the confines of his home, isolated from the temptations of the outside world!"

The Gaon responded that it is a mistake to think that temptations are limited to the street and do not exist in the home. The evil inclination also incites those who remain at home from the moment the person wakes up in the morning. (Some people relate a different version of this episode, but this version is the one which Rav Boruch Ber heard from his *rov*, Rav Chaim Brisker).

Thus, this *possuk* is saying that Hashem has given each Jew the choice of life or death, and he cannot run away from that choice. Even if a person were to lock himself up in his house, he would still be faced with trials and temptations, and would still have to choose between good and bad.

THE POSITIVE PATH

I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live (30:19)

The above *possuk* may be interpreted as follows. There are two ways to overcome the evil inclination. The first way is to contemplate that each sin leads to spiritual death in the world of truth. Alternatively, one can focus one's thoughts on the ultimate good to be derived from the path of Torah and *avodo*. Thus, "*I have set before you life and death*": I have set before you two ways to overcome the evil inclination, you can either focus on "life", and all the advantages that Torah has to offer, or on "death" in order to denigrate evil. However, "you shall choose life", the preferred avenue is to focus on the positive results, and only if you will not succeed this way, should you contemplate death, and what happens after death if one succumbs to the evil inclination.

The *gemoro* says (*Brochos* 5a): "A person should always 'incite' the good inclination against the evil inclination, if he is victorious, all is well, but if he is not, he should delve in Torah, if he is victorious all is well, but if he is not, he should read *krias Shema*, if he is victorious all is well, but if

not, he should remind himself of the day of his death”. The last suggestion of contemplating death appears at the end of the options listed by the *gemoro*. Clearly, then, the thought of death is a last resort which should only be utilized if the previous suggestions do not work.

THE LIVING DEAD

You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live. (30:19)

A person should not only feel that the Torah is something positive in his life, but that it is life itself, because without Torah a person is not considered to be alive at all, since his soul is dead. The Torah and *mitzvos* are the soul’s food and it cannot survive without them. The body may be alive but the person is only living the life of an animal, as Chazal say, “The wicked are called dead even when they are alive”. In a similar vein, it says in Yechezkel (18:12): “For I do not desire the death of the dead ... rather, turn yourselves and live”. The wicked person is termed “dead” because he has died a spiritual death, but *teshuva* has the power to bring him back to life completely. The *Mekubolim* explain that on *Rosh Hashono* a person is judged for his afterlife. Why would a person be judged with regard to his afterlife when he has not yet left this world?

It means that a person’s *neshomo* undergoes a “diagnosis” to see whether he has a connection to spirituality, to Hashem, or whether he is already spiritually dead. If he has a majority of merits but only stumbles in sin on occasion, he is considered spiritually alive and deemed worthy of being inscribed in the Book of Life, whereas if most of his acts are sins, he is considered spiritually disconnected from Hashem and therefore “dead.” If he is a *beinoni*, his judgement is not proclaimed until Yom Kippur, so that he may be given a chance to repent and be inscribed in the Book of Life.

The Meiri says that someone who does not repent on *Rosh Hashono* does not have a portion in the G-d of the Jews. This seems difficult to understand since the time for repentance is on Yom Kippur not *Rosh Hashono*, whose essence is rather the “coronation” (*malchuyos*) of Hashem by internalizing that everything stems from Him. However, the Meiri is not referring to a “punishment” for not doing *teshuvah*, but rather to a “sign.” If a person does not display any signs whatsoever of repentance on *Rosh Hashono* — not even during the *tekios* and the *tefillos* — he must worry about whether he is not among those who are already spiritually dead, and he must then undergo an intense process of repentance in order to break the walls separating him from the Creator.

TORAH AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

And it will be when they will encounter many evils and troubles, this song will bear witness against them, for it will not be forgotten from the mouth of their offspring. (31:21)

Rav Sternbuch recalls that shortly before the outbreak of World War II, when everyone was frightened about what the future held in store, Rav Elchonon Wasserman was in London collecting for his yeshivah. When he made it known that he wished to return to Poland, people begged him not to return to such a place of danger. But Rav Elchonon said that a captain does not abandon his ship at a time of danger, and he had no choice but to return to his students. A *talmid chochom* present on that occasion noted that Rav Elchonon was right, since we have been promised that the Torah “will not be forgotten from the mouth of their offspring,” and therefore, hopefully Polish Jewry would be saved. However, Rav Wasserman responded that although we have indeed been promised that the Torah will not be forgotten, we do not know how Hashem will orchestrate this, and maybe only a small handful would remain to fulfill this promise.

As we know, unfortunately this came true, but the small handful that remained produced a whole generation of Torah learners. After the Holocaust destroyed so much of Torah Jewry, Hashem left us with several places of Torah learning, and they served as the nuclei for the subsequent global explosion of Torah. Torah has the power to renew itself when it is taught and transmitted in the undiluted manner with which it has been transmitted throughout the generations.

Rosh Hashono

SANCTITY BEFORE ROSH HASHONO

It says in the Zohar that during the three days before *Rosh Hashono* the *ba'al tokea* and the *shli'ach tzibur* should be very careful to avoid any *tum'oh*. The Chasam Sofer notes that nowadays, since the *shli'ach tzibur* is not *motzi* the public, and everybody prays on his own, the ruling of the Zohar applies to all of us, which means that we are all obligated to sanctify ourselves to the best of our ability in the days leading up to *Rosh Hashono*.

Therefore, one must sanctify the final days leading up to *Rosh Hashono* through Torah, prayer, repentance and good deeds, and be especially careful about praying with concentration, and answering *yehi shem rabbo* with concentration, until the person becomes a complete repentant worthy of standing before the King. One should also be especially particular to avoid idle talk, and all the more so forbidden talk or *machlokes*, which, envelop the person with a great spirit of *tum'oh*, and prevent one's prayers during the *yomim noro'im* from rising heavenwards, G-d forbid.

THREE PARABLES

"On Rosh Hashana all the inhabitants of the world pass before Him, *kivnei maron* (like those of *Moron*)" (Rashi: "like sheep counted for the purpose of tithing which leave single file through a small opening"). Reish Lokish says "*maron*" refers to "the steps of a narrow mountain path" (a narrow mountain path overlooking a deep ravine on both sides). There is enough room for only one passer-by and so everyone walks in single file (Rashi). R. Yehudah, in the name of Shmuel says *bnei maron* mean "like the armies of the house of Dovid" (which were numbered one by one when they went out to war).

The parable of the sheep teaches us the important lesson that just like the sheep is on its own when being counted, so too each individual stands in judgement before the Creator on his own, and he is not judged by being compared to his friends, but only based on the special tools which he specifically has been endowed with for the purpose of serving Hashem, in order to determine whether he has fulfilled his purpose in life based on his own specific abilities. There is a natural tendency for a person to assess himself by comparing himself to his friends' situation, thereby concluding since they are worse than him, he is completely righteous. If we were to engage in honest introspection, we would realize that we actually think like that. This parable emphasizes the fallacy of this approach. Our only task is to determine whether we have fulfilled our own specific potential and our duties towards the Creator and our fellow man. That is the only yardstick, because only those are the criteria by which we are judged.

According to the parable of the dangerous mountain path, Hashem does not judge a person only according to his actions, but also according to the difficulties and trials which he has had to endure when performing *mitzvos*. Hashem examines the extent to which he has overcome his challenges without looking left or right, and continued walking on the narrow mountain path of his *avodas Hashem*.

The parable of the armies of the house of Dovid teaches us that just like the quality of a soldier is gauged by the extent to which he is willing to risk his life for the sake of the king's honor and in order to obey his will, so too Hashem examines each of us on *Rosh Hashonoh* to see whether we are willing to dedicate ourselves to Hashem and give up our own desires for the sake of performing His will, thereby proving the extent to which our inner being cleaves to Hashem "with all our hearts and all our souls". [The "house of Dovid" refers to the heavenly kingdom, because *Dovid Hamelech* corresponds to *malchus*].

BENEFITING THE PUBLIC

Rav Sternbuch recollects how Rav Elya Lopian would preface his talks during Elul by saying, "Today are so on so many days before *Rosh Hashono*". He would also say that a wonderful *segula* for meriting a favorable judgement on *Rosh Hashono* and for becoming worthy of Hashem's limitless *chesed* which He wishes to shower upon us, is to engage in public activities, or those that benefit the public, because then Hashem saves him from misfortunes so that the public will not lose out, or become upset, if this person becomes sick or suffers an evil decree. If his absence would harm others who need him, Hashem affords him special protection from misfortune, so that those who benefit from his activities will not suffer. For a *yeshiva bochur*, the greatest *chesed* he could do is to come to davening and to *sefer* on time, thereby encouraging others to do the same. Such acts of *chesed* arouse great Divine mercy.

TEST FOR SUCCESSFUL *TESHUVA*

Rav Sternbuch heard a *godol* interpreting the *possuk* “Take with you words, and return to Hashem” (Hoshea 14:3) as follows. Any person can examine themselves to see if they have repented properly by checking whether after the process of *teshuva* they find it easier to concentrate during *davening*, because the Zohar and the Arizal explain that when a person sins he creates “*klipos*” (literally: “husks”) that confuse him when he prays. If his level of concentration has improved, that is a clear sign that his *teshuva* has been accepted. Hence it says, “Take with you words” take the words which you pray, and use them to determine whether you have “returned to Hashem”.

KABOLAS HATORAH ON ROSH HASHONO

Rosh Hashono is like *kabolas hatorah* because the main *avodo* of the day is *malchuyos* in which we accept upon ourselves Hashem's kingship, and that is not possible without accepting the laws of the King. Therefore, on *Rosh Hashono* we accept on ourselves the yoke of Torah and undertake to keep all the *mitzvos* as well as the associated punishments and rewards for keeping or not keeping them.

CHOZER BITSHUVA

How can we enter the Day of Judgement in light of the fact that Hashem knows all our deeds and thoughts, and those leave much to be desired? The *Rashash* suggested in a *drosho* he gave before the *teki'os* that if we make a firm resolution to completely repent with regard to one feasible item, which needs rectifying, and which will not be too difficult for us to keep, then we will be deemed to have been *chozer betshuva*, and this can be an avenue for Hashem to forgive all our sins. Not only a complete *baal teshuva*, but even such a *chozer bitshuva*, who has not yet formally repented all of his sins, but has started to change his path, is considered to be a different person who has the power to overturn evil decrees.

It is obligatory to read *parshas Ki Sovo* before the year is up so that we can end the year with the curses contained in that *parsha* already behind us (*Megila* 31b), but in practice the very last *parsha* we read before *Rosh Hashono* is *Nitzovim*, because if it would be *Ki Sovo* there would be a danger of our becoming frightened or depressed by the curses enumerated there, and therefore we read *Nitzovim* in order to bring home the point that we have a way to be saved from those curses. Armed with the knowledge of the immense power of *teshuva*, we can thereby enter *Rosh Hashono* with the requisite state of joy.

JOY ON THE DAY OF JUDGEMENT

Rosh Hashono is characterized, on the one hand, by fear of the Day of Judgment, but, on the other hand, the Yerushalmi (see also the *Tur*) brings down that we wear white clothes and shave in order to show that we are confident of a favorable judgment. How can we reconcile these two seemingly conflicting ideas?

If a defendant in a court case is sure that he will be convicted and that he has no chances of an acquittal, the judge will be likely to convict him just because of his demeanor, but if he displays confidence that he is in the right, and that the charge against him has been concocted, the judge will begin to wonder whether the defendant's claims might really be true, and he starts to examine the matter further.

Similarly, on the outside, we too exhibit confidence that we will merit a favorable outcome, but inside we tremble and supplicate for a favorable judgment. This does not mean that we are, *chas vesholom*, deceiving ourselves. Rather, since the main component of the judgment on *Rosh Hashono* consists of an examination, a kind of diagnosis, of our spiritual situation, whether we are on an appropriate spiritual level or completely materialistic with no link to anything spiritual, the greatest danger in this trial is to show that we have despaired of ourselves, believing that we have no chance of succeeding in our efforts to improve ourselves. We therefore make an effort on the Day of Judgement to demonstrate and feel joy, since we are confident that our repentance will be accepted. In other words, we reinforce our feeling that we can change and become closer to Hashem, instead of just mouthing words insincerely.

As for *selichos*, although they should be said with a broken heart, we should at the same time feel joy at the thought that we are standing before our Father in Heaven, who wants and expects us to return to Him and receive a favorable judgment. We should feel confident that we will have the merit of becoming closer to Hashem and to *avodas Hashem*, and that our prayers will be answered.