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The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet

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Parshat Nitzavim - Vayelech
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BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

The final portions of the Torah don't let us escape from the harsh realities of real-world trials and tribulations. In this week's combined portions of Nitzavim & Vayelech, and in the following portion of Ha'azinu, the Torah discusses the harsh realities of sin and consequences.

Hashem describes the scenario that will arise after the death of Moshe. "And this nation will arise and turn to foreign gods, and they will leave the treaty that I cut with them. And my wrath shall burn upon them and I will leave them. They will be for prey and many evils, and pain will find them, and they will say on that day, 'is it not because G-d is not with us that all this evil befalls us!' And I will hide My face on that day for all the evil that they did; for turning to other gods." (Deuteronomy 31:16-19).

The next verse seems totally out of place. "And now write this song for them and place it in their mouths and teach it to the children of Israel, so that this song will be for Me as a testimony in the Children of Israel" (Deuteronomy 31:20).

The juxtaposition of the verses provokes many questions. Why does Hashem tell Moshe to write the song now? Why is the impending doom called "a song"? Why does the Torah say "it will be a testimony for Me"? Who is testifying and to whom? What does it mean "put it in their mouths"? Shouldn't the Torah be put in their ears? Why would we want to sing this distressing song anyway? Of course, Rashi and many of the great medieval commentators explain these verses with great clarity. I, however, would like to take a homiletic approach.

After World War II, the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yukisiel Halberstam, of blessed memory, a survivor of the concentration camps held a minyan in the Beth Moses Hospital in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Parshas Ki Savo arrived and with it, the section known as the tochacha (admonishment), which is filled with foreboding warnings of doom and destruction, lest the Jewish nation stray from the will of G-d. The verses warn of unimaginable horrors: exile, starvation, rape, robbery, and torture — to name just a few. The custom of Jews world-over is to read the verses of tochacha quietly, so as not to rile up enemies, celestial and otherwise, who may think those calamities a good idea to cast upon the Jewish Nation. So it was the portion of Ki Savo, and the Klausenberger Rebbe and his minyan of ravaged survivors were about to read the tochacha and re-live horrors of their recent history through the words of the ancient prophecies. The Torah-reader started the verses of doom in a hushed tone. He began reading them quietly and quickly. Suddenly the Rebbe banged on his lectern. "Hecher!" he shouted. (Yiddish for louder.) The reader looked up from the Torah with a puzzled look on his face. Perhaps he was reading the Torah a bit too low. He raised his voice a notch, and continued in a louder undertone. But the Rebbe was not satisfied. "Louder!" he exclaimed. By now the reader was reading as loudly as his normal recitation, and yet the Rebbe continued to bang on the lectern and exclaim, "HECHER!" The reader could not contain his puzzlement and instead of shouting the portion he stopped and looked to the Rebbe for an explanation. "We no longer have to read these miserable curses quietly," the Rebbe exclaimed. "There is no curse we have not experienced. There is no affliction we have not suffered! We saw it all. We lived it all. Let us shout with pride to our Father in Heaven that we have already received all the curses! We have survived these curses, and now it is His turn to bring us the blessings and the redemption!" And with that the reader continued reading the tochacha loud and clear as if singing an anthem to his nation's tenacity.

Hashem tells Moshe to write this song and teach it to every Jew that will face difficulties. It shall be "a song that should be in our mouths. And it will be a testimony before the Almighty." Our experiences should be sung with honor as a badge of courage and fortitude. Like the Purple Hearts of wounded soldiers, they shall be a witness to Him. So that when calamities befall us we shall surmount our misfortunes. They will not be agonies that we shall cower behind. Rather, they will be a testimony to our faith, our commitment, and most importantly our eternity.

Do not separate From the community

by Rabbi Zev Leff

"Today you are all standing before the Lord your God. " (Deut. 29:9)

After the 98 curses that the Jewish people heard at the end of Parshas Ki Tavo, they were devastated and questioned whether they could possibly withstand such terrible punishments. Moses encouraged them with the opening words of this week's parsha: *"Today you are all standing."* Although you have sinned many times, all of you still stand today before God.

Was Moses trying to minimize the severity of the Divine reproof, or imply that it was only a threat that would not be carried out? Furthermore, how could Moses say that all were alive and well despite their sins, when in fact tens of thousands had perished in the Desert?

Rather, Moses' intention was to assure the Jewish people that the purpose of the curses was not to wreak vengeance on them for their sins, but to insure their survival as a nation. And, therefore he told them collectively - *kulchem* - you still stand today. After all the sins and all the punishments, the community is eternal. The concept of death does not exist with respect to the community. Those who perished died not as individuals, but as a part of the Jewish community, which is eternal, and therefore they still survive.

Conversely, one who separates himself from the community and says, "I will do as I see fit," will not be forgiven and will be utterly destroyed. Our relationship to God is only through the community. The Torah was not given to individuals; nor were the covenants made with individuals. Our relationship to God is as members of the Jewish community. Maimonides (Teshuva 3:24) classifies a heretic as one who keeps all the mitzvot but separates himself from the Jewish people. Without a link to the community, there can be no link to God and Torah.

Hillel taught (Avos 2:5): "Do not separate yourself from the community." The Mishnah then continues with what seems on the surface to be additional, unrelated teachings of Hillel. However, a deeper study of the Mishnah reveals that they are in fact the rebuttal of various arguments for cutting oneself off from the community.

"Do not believe in yourself until the day you die." Do not think that you are strong enough spiritually to function on your own without the supportive Jewish community. Do not rely on your apparent spiritual security, for it is never guaranteed.

"Do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place." In your criticism of the other members of the community, don't convince yourself that you would be better off separated from them. Rather, judge them favorably and understand the circumstances that generate those actions which offend you. See their good points. Avoid what is negative without separating yourself entirely.

"Do not make a statement that cannot be easily understood on the ground that it will be understood eventually." People are sometimes frustrated that their views and opinions are not accepted by the community, but one must realize that the fault may lie in his views and not in the community. Perhaps his opinions are not fit to be heard and accepted.

And finally, "Do not say, 'when I have time I will learn,' for perhaps you will never have time." There are those who feel that communal responsibilities infringe too greatly on their time and potential for personal development. They therefore conclude that disassociating themselves from communal involvement will give them more time to learn. Never reckon that time can be generated by avoiding a mitzvah. That time might never materialize. God will not permit one to benefit by neglecting his communal responsibilities.

One of the benefits of being part of the community is that as part of a united entity one's individual failings may be overlooked. The Jewish nation is eternal, pure, and holy, and one benefits by strengthening his connection to it. But he cannot reap the benefits from the community without accepting the concomitant responsibilities. Do not delude yourself that *"Lema'an sfos harava es hatzeme'a"* - that two adjacent fields are of necessity irrigated together, even though only one of them deserves the water. That is a fantasy.

Although each individual must be concerned with his personal judgment on Rosh Hashanah, as a community we dress up and eat as a sign of confidence that God will exonerate us as members of the community. The Ten Days of Repentance are days for intensifying our link to the community. For that reason, every individual during that period has the same assurance that his entreaties to God will be heard that the community does year round. During those days the individual and the community become one.

Thus, the cantor (*shaliach tzibur*) on Rosh Hashanah is granted a special power to represent every individual, even those who are proficient in prayer, and therefore not included in the *shaliach tzibbur's* prayers the rest of the year.

Elisha the prophet offered to pray for the childless Shunamite woman on Rosh Hashanah. But she responded, "*I dwell amongst my nation.*" Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz explains her response: "Don't single me out, for the power of the community is greater even than the prayer of God's chosen prophet."

Standing Still

by Sarah Maddali

This week's Torah portion starts off telling us that the Jews were all standing before God. What is significant about the Jews standing together?

Lesson: When someone is standing, they are still. Most of our life we are running from this place to that place, from here to there. We want to accomplish, conquer, acquire, achieve and all that requires running. God wants us to do all these things – it is a huge gift from God that He allows us to partake in the creation of our own lives and beings and the world. And we enjoy it as God programmed us as humans with a natural desire to want succeed in various pursuits.

However, there are certain things that cannot be accomplished by running; they can only be achieved by standing still. Self-reflection, which is the premise of *teshuvah*, (repentance) and growth, requires us to stand still, take an assessment of where we are headed, who we are, and who we want to become. Stop. Reflect. Self-assess. And make the appropriate changes.

A farmer saved up to buy an expensive watch for himself. One day he looked at his wrist and to his dismay saw his watch was gone! He retraced his steps and could not find his watch anywhere. He realized that his watch must have fallen into the barn and got completely covered in hay. He tried overturning as much hay as he could, but with no success. He saw some young boys and hired them to try to look through the hay in the barn to find his watch. The boys enthusiastically agreed and in no time were throwing the hay in this direction and that direction to try to find the farmer's watch. A while later, the boys, with their heads down, told the farmer they could not find the watch. The farmer realized that it was like finding a needle in a haystack and was hoping that he would find it the following year when the barn would be cleaned out.

One boy went back to the barn and after a few minutes emerged with the watch held high, "I found it!" he exclaimed.

"That's amazing!" said the farmer! "How did you find it?"

The boy replied, "I went back to the barn when it was quiet and just listened. I heard the ticking of the watch and was able to find it."

Often, we hear better when we are quiet and still. We need to block out distractions, focus on hearing God's messages and change accordingly. Change is hard but that is what we are here to do. Become better people, closer to God and those around us.

“You are all standing this day before Hashem, your G-d: the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel” (29:9)

In his introduction to Parshas Nitzavim, Rabbeinu Bachya discusses the topic of rebuke, since Moshe’s rebuke of the Jewish people is the subject of the first half of the parsha. He writes: “The love of [receiving] rebuke is a sign and indication of good character, but the rejection of rebuke is a major testimony of evil nature and inferior character.” People who are defensive and resistant whenever they hear constructive criticism show that their nature is not good, but a refined person appreciates reproof. This is because a life of growth is dependent on rebuke. Accepting mussar results in a well-lived life because it enables a person to correct his mistakes and grow. This understanding should change our feelings about receiving well-intended criticism.

“The hidden things are for Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed things are for us and for our children forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah” (29:28)

Rabbeinu Bachya says in the name of the Rambam that there are many secrets of the Torah. There are many mitzvos whose reasons are hidden from us. These hidden reasons do indeed exist, but they are known only to Hashem. This does not mean that they are baseless, but that there are reasons which we are not privy to. This fact does not weaken our obligation to actually fulfill these commandments. What is revealed to us, the actual mitzvah, we must do, regardless of whether we understand its reasons or not. Often we go through times when we don’t understand certain aspects of life. Our lack of understanding does not mean that it has no reason. We must continue forward anyway and trust in Hashem and continue to do our part to fulfill that which has been revealed to us.

“This day, I call upon the heaven and the earth as witnesses for you: 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 Torah urges us to choose life “so both you and your children will live.” Your choice affects more than just you. You set your children up for that kind of life as well, making it easier for them to make the right choices as they grow older and more independent. One’s values have a profound effect on one’s children. They will follow that which their parents find important, exciting and meaningful. When faced with spiritual challenges, we should muster the courage to make the right choices for ourselves, but also for our children and our future generations who will be better off because of our perseverance. Kli Yakar extends this idea and explains that this awareness should dissuade a person from sinning. Even if a person is willing to sacrifice his own eternal reward for the sake of immediate gratification and enjoying the temporal pleasures, why should he sacrifice the spiritual future of his children who will not even experience the sinful pleasures that he desires? When a person realizes how his choices will affect his future generations, he will do the right thing for the sake of his children, who will only suffer and without gaining any benefit whatsoever from his poor choices.

“And Moshe went, and he spoke the following words to all Israel” (31:1)

In his introduction to Parshas Vayeilech, Rabbeinu Bachya writes that the reward for a person who pursues a mitzvah opportunity is even greater than the reward for doing a mitzvah that falls into a person’s lap without any extra effort. This is why Moshe chose to go around the camp and speak words of comfort to the Jewish people about his impending death instead of just gathering them together for a public statement. Moshe wanted to invest additional effort in performing a mitzvah. This is the attitude that we should adopt when it becomes difficult for us to do certain mitzvos. We should appreciate the opportunity to earn extra reward. One practical way to apply this in our lives is when we travel great distances to participate in the joyous events in our friends’ lives. The travel is long and burdensome, but it is a part of the mitzvah that we do for our friends. When we appreciate that the trip as part of the preparation for the mitzvah, we will not find it as challenging.

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

Moshe wrote carried out Hashem’s instructions to write the Sefer Torah on “that day,” the same day on which he received the command. He did not delay at all when it came time to fulfill the will of Hashem. This is an important lesson that is relevant to all of us.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

G-d Is Always In Our Midst

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

In Parshas VaYelech, on the last day of Moshe Rabbeinu's life, Moshe received the following prophetic news: "Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land, in whose midst it is coming, and it will forsake Me and annul My covenant that I have sealed with it. My anger will face against it on that day and I will forsake them; and I will conceal My face from them and they will become prey, and many evils and distresses will encounter it. It will say on that day 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?'" [Devarim 31:16-17]

It would seem to us that these words 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?' would represent a positive action on the part of the people. So much of the Tochacha [Chastisement] in Parshas Bechukosai contains the refrain "And you have conducted yourself with me B'KERI [as if they were just matters of chance or bad luck]." It seems like this attitude on our part is itself the cause of the Almighty's anger with us. We are not supposed to attribute personal tragedy to "statistics" or to the fact that "our number is up".

It would seem that the reaction foretold in Parshas Vayelech ("Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?") is a very positive one! If that is the case, the subsequent pasuk [verse] is very surprising. It describes the Almighty's reaction, and reads: "But I will surely conceal My face on that day, because of all the evil that [the nation] did, for it had turned to gods of others." [Devarim 31:18]

Why would that be? If people were doing what they were supposed to be doing and asking all the right questions of self-introspection, why would the Almighty hide His face from us? Apparently, "Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst?" is NOT the proper reaction.

The Rebbe Reb Bunim of Pshischa explains why this is NOT the proper reaction. No matter how bad troubles may seem, a Jew should never say and should never feel that the Almighty has abandoned him. It is heretical to say: "G-d died in the Holocaust." This in no way minimizes the tremendous fortitude it took for someone who went through the Holocaust to remain a full believer and "no one should judge his fellow until he has been in his place," however theologically it is an unacceptable response to say "G-d is no longer in our midst; He is dead!"

The correct response is that G-d remains in our midst, but for some reason (perhaps not-understandable to us) He is punishing us. For this reason, according to the Rebbe Reb Bunim the reaction of the Almighty to such a statement was "I will surely hide My face on that day."

The Gemara [Yoma 54b] states that the Cherubs atop the Ark in the Holy of Holies were male and female forms. When the Jews would fulfill the Will of the Almighty the Cherubs would embrace one another. When the Jews would not fulfill His Will, they were separated.

The Talmud states that when the Romans entered the Holy of Holies during their destruction of the Second Temple, they saw the male and female figures intertwined in an embrace and they mocked the Jews over the fact that they maintained male and female figures in intimate poses in their Holy Temple.

The commentaries question why the Cherubs would be embracing during the time of the Temple's destruction. Superficially, we would think that there was no greater moment when "Israel did not fulfill the Will of the Almighty" than the time when He saw fit to have the Beis HaMikdash destroyed. At such a time, we would have expected to find the Cherubs separated from one another.

The answer is because at the moment the Temple was destroyed, the punishment had already been delivered. Immediately afterwards, the love of the Almighty towards us was restored. It is like when a father spanks his child. Right after administering the spanking, he embraces the child. The child may have deserved the spanking for doing something wrong, but once that debt was paid, the love of father to son is immediately made evident again.

"Behold the L-rd is not in my midst" is never our situation. The message is always "I am still with you, Klal Yisrael."

To Boldly Go

By Sheldon Stern

In Judaism, we don't speak of coincidences. Everything is under Hashem's aegis; therefore, we must ask why the Torah juxtaposes Parshas Nitzavim and Vayeilech. Sure there's the flippant answer: both Parshas are very short, and we need to combine them to give the leidegayers time to hang out at the Kiddush club. But seriously folks we can discern an essential Yideah from their association.

In Parshas Nitzavim Moshe tells the people, "You are all standing, etc", while in Vayeilech, Moshe is going. How do we explain this dichotomy? My aunt Doreen was my favorite relative. Chillax ma, you're in a separate category. Doreen married my mother's brother when I was six, and we bonded immediately. Sadly she was ravaged by cancer and diabetes and passed away while still in her fifties. In her later years, I would call her every Sunday morning before starting my work day. She once said, "When I ask my Rabbi a question I don't want him to tell me what's permitted, I want to know what he does, and I'll do the same." Aunt Doreen was modern Orthodox, didn't cover her hair etc, but was fiercely devoted to Hashem and the Torah and now she's shepping incredible Nachas in Gan Eden from her wonderful family. So the question is, "Was her attitude correct?" I would say yes and no. Obviously, it's praiseworthy to eschew taking the easy way out in the religion, however, the Smichas in our Parshiyos indicates that there is a distinction between the Rabbinic class and the landsleit. Rabbi Simcha Wasserman ZTL, son of the legendary Rav Elchanan Wasserman, articulated this idea. He said that the Jewish people are compared to an army. The Rosh Yeshivos are the generals and so on down the line. The idea is that each group has its particular task and responsibility. So the Torah expresses it as the masses being stationary while Moshe is moving, but what does that teach us? Rank and file Jews must simply keep the Torah. Therefore if a Rabbi told my aunt that xyz is permitted she should accept his advice and follow it as would any good soldier. Sure there are certain Mitzvos that some find more appealing and if they want to extend themselves in those areas, gezunterheit, but for the most part just do what the Halacha dictates. About 30 years ago Rav Reuvein Feinstein spoke at the East Side Torah Center. In his matter-of-fact style, he said, "Judaism is simple just keep the mitzvos." Easier said than done but the great Rosh Yeshiva was saying that we don't have to reinvent the wheel. The Torah's laws are pleasant so we just have to follow them.

But then we come to the Rabbis. Here it gets more complicated. First, whether they like it or not, Rabbis present as role models. Doreen and my uncle Norman lived in West Hempstead. I spent many Shabbosim and Yomim Tovim as their guests. Rabbi Sholom Gold served as the spiritual leader of the Young Israel until he made Aliyah. He was replaced by Rabbi Yehuda Kelemer. ZTL I never met Rabbi Kelemer but last week I spoke to someone who knew him well and I was told that he was a jewel. A great Rabbi can elevate the spiritual level, not only of his shul, but of his entire community. Boruch Hashem I was raised on the LES and even though I wasn't particularly frum growing up the Feinstein influence permeated. In addition, my parents had wonderful Middos that they transmitted to their children.

This said when the Parsha speaks of Moshe "going" it reflects a separate type of spiritual leader. In Devarim 10:12 Moshe tells the nation that all Hashem asks of them is to keep the Mitzvos, fear, and love Hashem. Seemingly that's all there is so why does Moshe make it sound like it's a simple matter? Rashi answered that yes, for Moshe it was a Kleinerkeit. But this leads us to ask, "What would Moshe consider difficult?" In a recent essay, I mentioned George Harrison's post-Beatles hit "My Sweet Lord" which featured the lines, "really want to see You, really want to be with You." The song continued, "really want to know You, really want to go with You." The silent Beatle was Michavin to our Parsha. To really know Hashem requires one to go with Him. That means one must leave his mundane existence and enter a new dimension, while at the same time functioning normally in this world. So what does that mean? The Talmud Chagigah 14a,b says that four entered the Pardes(orchard) but only Rabbi Akiva remained mentally and physically intact. I have no concept of what they experienced but it was a transcendental encounter with the Torah on levels that few can even contemplate. So this is what Moshe was alluding to. People famously said of Rav Moshe, "For himself, he ruled stringently, but for others he was lenient." Similarly, Moshe Rabbeinu told his flock to follow Halacha, but his Torah exposed him to contradictions that Tannaim like Ben Zoma, Ben Azzai, and Elisha Ben Avuyah couldn't navigate. So why even try? Dovid Hamelech wrote, "It's stormy at the top." The closer we come to Hashem the more likely it is to slip up and this can have disastrous consequences. Yeravam Ben Nevat is singled out by Pirkei Avos as the paradigm of Chotei Umachtei but he was a scholar non-pareil. So why take the chance? The Gemara noted that four people never sinned, Binyamin, Amram, Yishai, and Cileav. Rabbi Miller commented that in each case they had a more illustrious family member, Yosef, Moshe, Dovid, and Shlomo and so he concluded that Hashem is more interested in people accomplishing than avoiding sin. There's a story of the Netziv. When he was young he wasn't successful in his Torah studies and his parents decided to make him an apprentice. He overheard them discussing the matter and put his nose to the grindstone ultimately becoming one of the Gedolei Hador. Later in life he commented, "Had I followed the path my father laid out for me they would take me to task in Shomayim for not having written the Seforim I produced," What a powerful idea. Hashem judges us not only for our Mitzvos and sins but also for whether we fulfilled our potential. Therefore those who are blessed with greater talents can't be complacent. And that's why the Moshe Rabbeinu of the world never rest on their laurels. Rather they boldly go where no man has gone before.