

Parsha Potpourri

Parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech – Vol. 21, Issue 46

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אתם נצבים היום כלכם לפני ד' אלקיכם (29:9)

The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 16b) teaches that three books are opened on Rosh Hashana: one for the completely righteous, one for the totally wicked, and one for those in the middle. People who are totally good are immediately written and sealed for life. People who are completely evil are immediately written and sealed for death. The judgment of those in between is suspended until Yom Kippur, at which point they are written for life if they are found meritorious, and for death if they are not.

According to the Gemara, people who are completely righteous will have their final judgments sealed after 30 days of repentance in the month of Elul, while others are not sealed until after 40 days, on Yom Kippur. The Zohar HaKadosh adds that there are others whose judgment is not complete until Shemini Atzeres, which is 52 days from the beginning of Elul, and there is a final group whose fate is not sealed until Zos Chanuka (the eighth day of Chanuka), which is 122 days from Rosh Chodesh Elul.

Rav Moshe Wolfson suggests that these four time periods are alluded to in the Torah portions read at this time of year. This Shabbos we read Parshas Vayeilech, which contains 30 pesukim (verses) and alludes to the completely righteous who are sealed in the book of life on Rosh Hashana. We also read Parshas Nitzavim, which has 40 pesukim and hints to those whose judgment is finalized on Yom Kippur.

On Shabbos Shuva, we will read Parshas Haazinu, which is comprised of 52 pesukim, symbolizing the group whose judgment is completed on Shemini Atzeres. Adding up the number of pesukim in these three Torah portions yields 122, which represents the final group whose verdict remains unsealed for 122 days. This group, whose judgment is finalized on Zos Chanuka, is also alluded to by the first word of the following parsha, which begins V'zos (HaBeracha).

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

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

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

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

According to Rav Hutner's insight, we now understand that there is an important difference between the two cases. The Gemara says that if a person does a mitzvah but later decides not to maintain it,

the mitzvah becomes lost and dies, since, like life, good requires ongoing sustenance. Sin – spiritual death – is different, because once something has died, the laws of nature mandate that it stays dead forever.

Even if a person attempts to stop sustaining spiritual death by regretting his transgression, it will still be dead. Accordingly, teshuvah for a sin is fundamentally unlike “teshuvah” for a mitzvah and indeed represents a tremendous gift from Hashem, in which He enables us to resurrect and rectify a misdeed that according to the laws of nature should remain irreparable and permanently dead.

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

למעןך אלקינו עשה ולא לנו (סליחות)

Rav Yisroel Reisman recounts that a wealthy Jew who lived in an apartment building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan once noticed several police cars in front of the building. As he was going down, he asked a man in the elevator if he knew why they were there. The man told him that he lived in the penthouse, and his father was the king of a country in Africa. His father had just come to visit him, which is why there was so much security outside. The Yid was visibly impressed by this information, so the prince asked him, “Would you like to meet my father?”

The Jew accepted the invitation, and the prince told him to come to his penthouse at 8:00 that night. As he was preparing to meet the royal visitor, his son expressed interest in joining him, and they went up to the penthouse together. When the king saw them, he asked the son how old he was. He said that he had just turned 13, and the king asked, “Isn’t that a special age for Jewish boys?” The son confirmed that indeed it is, and he just celebrated his Bar Mitzvah the week before.

When the Yid went to get his mail the next day, he was stunned to find that the king left a \$50,000 check as a Bar Mitzvah gift for his son. He went to the prince and told him, “I don’t know if you’re familiar with customary Bar Mitzvah presents, but \$180 is considered generous. Nobody in our circles gives \$50,000 for a Bar Mitzvah.” The prince responded, “You don’t understand. You may be right that Bar Mitzvah boys usually get much smaller gifts, but it is beneath the king’s dignity to give anything less than \$50,000.”

A short while later, the family took a trip to Eretz Yisroel in honor of the Bar Mitzvah. When they visited Rav Chaim Kanievisky, the father recounted this story. Rav Chaim replied that this incident gave him a new insight into our davening at this time of year. Each day in Selichos we ask Hashem **למעןך אלקינו עשה ולא לנו** – Act for your sake, not for ours. Our primary goal is that Hashem should answer our prayers. As long as He does so, why do we care whether it is for His sake or for ours?

Rav Chaim said that after hearing this story, he now understands that we might only deserve \$180 checks, but if an African king can’t give less than \$50,000, then for the Ribbono Shel Olam, it would be inappropriate to give anything less than billions. We therefore ask Hashem not only to grant our requests, but to do so on a scale that’s appropriate for a present from the King of Kings.

Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources that discuss them):

- 1) Moshe reminded the people (Devarim 29:15-16) of the detestable and abominable idols which they saw in Egypt and other lands through which they passed. Why was it necessary to warn them (Ibid., 29:17) against worshipping these idols if they themselves had witnessed how deplorable they were? (Nesivos Rabboseinu, Shiras Dovid)
- 2) Moshe said that the Torah is not in heaven (Devarim 30:12). The Gemara (Bava Metzia 59b) understands this to mean that after the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, it is up to the Rabbis to

decide matters of Jewish law, which are no longer within the jurisdiction of Hashem. In numerous places, the Gemara records episodes in which a bas kol – heavenly voice – descends to inform the Sages with which opinion in a dispute Hashem sides. Why is it referred to as a bas kol – literally, the daughter of a sound – and not as a ben kol – the son of a sound – or simply as the sound itself? (Tosefos Sanhedrin 11a, Tosefos Yom Tov Yevamos 16:6)

- 3) The Gemara in Sotah (13b) derives from Devarim 31:2 that the righteous die on the day on which they were born, as Hashem completes the years of the righteous from day to day and from month to month. How can this be reconciled with the Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashana 3:8) which relates that when doing battle, the Amalekites chose soldiers whose birthdays were on the day of the battle, as on a person's birthday his mazal is stronger and protects him from dying? (Taima D'Kra)
- 4) Which two names of parshios in Sefer Bereishis are found in Parshas Vayeilech? (Torah Teasers)

Answers to Points to Ponder:

1) The **Brisker Rav** answers that exposure to something forbidden, such as idols, even if a person intellectually recognizes that it is repugnant, still leaves an emotional impression. Although one's initial reaction is to be repulsed, his senses are also dulled in the process. The next time he sees them, his response will not have the same intensity, and he may even be convinced that they are not so problematic after all. After sufficient exposure, he may even come to see positive qualities in them. For this reason, Moshe had to warn the people against worshipping the idols, which they had originally viewed as detestable but to which they may have become desensitized over time. In light of this phenomenon, the Brisker Rav warned against traveling to places where Shabbos was violated to protest, as witnessing its desecration can negatively affect one's own Shabbos observance.

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

3) **Rav Chaim Kanievsky** explains that on a person's birthday, his mazal is indeed stronger and able to assist him. However, the form of aid it provides depends on the type of person he is. For an ordinary person, death is considered a punishment, and his strong mazal helps to protect against it on his birthday. For the righteous, death is considered beneficial as it brings them directly to Gan Eden, and their strong mazal actually works to bring this about on the day of their birth.

4) Moshe told Bnei Yisroel (Devarim 31:10) to gather to hear the king publicly read from the Torah **מִקֵּץ שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים** – at the end of seven years. After Hashem informed Moshe that the time of his death was approaching, he went with Yehoshua to the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting), where **וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו** – Hashem appeared (Ibid., 31:15). Mikeitz and Vayeira are both names of Torah portions in Sefer Bereishis.