

NITZAVIM

**RENEWING VOWS, ROCK-SOLID
COMMITMENTS**

A

Standing through Curses

“Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Hashem Elokeichem...l'avrecha bivris Hashem Elokecha. You (the Jewish people) are standing in front of Hashem your God to...make a covenant with Hashem your God.” This *parsha* of Nitzavim, presents Bnei Yisrael with a new covenant, a *bris*, which obligates us to keep our commitment to the Torah. Chazal explain that all the Jews, even those who would eventually be born, were included in that commitment.

Rashi asks: Why does this *bris* come right after Parshas Ki Savo, with its terrible curses for those who don't keep the Torah? He explains that, after Bnei Yisrael heard the ninety-eight horrendous curses, their faces blanched. In order to give them encouragement Moshe told them, “Look, you have sinned in the past and you are still standing. Even with all of these curses, don't think it is hopeless. *Atem nitzavim hayom.* Just as you are standing today, you will be able to stand in the future.”

This requires an explanation. The curses really are terrible. What did Moshe mean that you are standing despite the curses? Are the curses fake?

B

Temporary Spiritual Amnesia

Shem Mishmuel presents an amazing idea. A person normally only sins when he or she loses awareness of Hashem. A believing person may have temporary spiritual amnesia. He is involved in a situation, maybe with family, friends, or business, and essentially forgets that Hashem is involved.

Dovid Hamelech said, “*Shivisi Hashem l’negdi samid*. I am always aware of God’s presence in everything I am doing.” This is the key to avoiding *aveiros* and continuously doing great things. Will I sin in Hashem’s presence? He sustains my life; He is the Creator of everything. Only insanity could lead a person to cross Hashem in His presence. Would a person go into the White House with the president of the United States there, and take a magic marker and mark up the walls of the Lincoln bedroom? Only a crazy person would do that. When the king is there, nobody normal would insult him.

The average sinner, however, has a case of spiritual amnesia. We forget that we are breathing, living, and existing due to His constant will for us to be here. We experience a forgetfulness that leads to the mentality that allows us to sin. This is the core cause of sin. We know the conflict between the *yeitzer tov* and the *yeitzer ra*. Sometimes the evil defeats the good. It all begins, though, because a person is not aware that Hashem is there.

C

Those Who Say “God Left Us”

The Torah writes in Parshas Vayeilech “*V’chara api bayom hahu...v’amar bayom hahu halo al ki ein elokai b’kirbi m’tzauni ha’raos ha’eileh? V’anochi haster astir panai bayom hahu al kol ha’ra’a asher asa*. My anger will burn on that day...and Bnei Yisrael

will say on that day, ‘Is it not due to God not being among us that all these evils have happened to us?’ And I will hide My face on that day because of all the evil they have done.”

Why would God punish the Jews for saying that He is not with us? A person who says this statement recognizes that Hashem is not with him, and that is why he was subject to these terrible episodes. It seems an honest recognition of one’s spiritual amnesia and a sign of regret and repentance.

Shem Mishmuel quotes Reb Bunim of Peshischa to explain this. That statement itself, says Rav Bunim, is a terrible sin. When bad things happen to us, we search for answers. But a Jew cannot accurately say, “God has left me; this is the only way I can explain these horrible disasters.” God doesn’t leave anybody. He is with the Jewish people at all times. He may seem distant, *as if* He has gone away. He may in fact become distant, as the prophet says, “*Avono’s Eichem mavdilos*. Your sins create a barrier between you and God.” But we cannot say that God has left us. It is simply not true.

D

The *Shechina* in *Galus*

On a deeper level, we always have our connection with God. Hashem is “*shochen itam b’soch tumosam*. He dwells among the Jews even in their defilement.” The *pshat* of this *pasuk* means that Hashem stays in the camp of the Jews even if they are physically *tamei*. The Midrash says that Hashem will stay with us despite the *tuma* we created with our sins. “*Shechinta b’galusa*” Hashem is in the exile with the Jews, say our Sages.

Shechinta b’galusa means that Hashem remains loyal to us in every situation, even in the worst of sinful times and places. Hashem never completely abandons His people. So, Reb Bunim says, when Jews say, “Hashem has completely walked away from us, He

is completely separate from us,” they commit a grave sin. Hashem is indeed *always* connected to us, even in the worst of all exiles, the ones that we brought about through our failures.

In response to our foolish statement, Hashem will hide His face from us. He says, “*Anochi haster astir panai bayom hahu.*” The word that Hashem uses in this *pasuk* is “*astir*,” meaning, “I will hide.” He may even be truly close, but in a secret, hidden place. Our perception is that God is not with us; we don’t actually see Him. But He is with us, just hiding so that we can’t see Him.

The Chassidishe *sefarim* say that in the deepest *hester* hides the greatest light. They compare this to a great black cloud that blocks the sun. Sometimes, the sun will poke through and a beam of light will shine down on us. We think Hashem is not with us, but He is there, hiding. In Shir Hashirim, the verse says, “*Mei’tzitz min ha’charakim.* [God] is peaking through the cracks.” Even in the darkness, when it appears that He is not there, His eyes are still upon us.

This is a tremendous encouragement. In our personal lives, we have many situations in which we feel alienated from and abandoned by Hashem. Maybe we can blame our own sins for this. But we must know that this is completely false. No one is actually abandoned. Every person has the Shechina with him no matter what is going on. The Shechina joins us in *tuma*, in defilement. We can ask the Shechina to help take us out of this alienation and the darkness that surrounds us. The Gemara in Ta’anis 11 says that a person should always think that something holy is inside his innards. When we feel this, it provides a tremendous sense of inspiration and love. That rays of the shining sun can reach us and brighten our lives, melting away the alienation.

Commitment Amid Collapse

The Jewish people had just heard ninety-eight terrible curses. The people were thinking, “If these curses happen, how will we ever emerge from them? Even if the curses end, how will we ever regain our faith?” So, Moshe Rabbeinu said, “We need to make a new commitment, a new *bris*. Even if all these curses occur, and your world collapses, you will remain committed.”

This passage in Nitzavim is a new *bris*. The first covenant between the Jewish people and Hashem took place at Sinai; then we promised to keep the Torah. Why was it important to create a new *bris*? A *bris* is a new level—a formalized, codified, and complete commitment.

The Jewish people received the Torah in the desert. The desert was in some ways an ideal situation. The Jews were in isolation. They had Moshe and Aharon and other great sages to teach them Torah. They saw God’s presence twenty-four hours a day. Bread fell from heaven every day. Miriam’s well traveled with them wherever they went. Hashem was clearly engineering their whole environment. It should have been relatively easy for them to keep the Torah.

Therefore, Moshe warned them, “You are going to Eretz Yisrael. You are going to leave this form of existence, and you will live a regular life.” Regular life is different. It makes us forget that Hashem is in the world. It makes people look for different pursuits such as amassing wealth, fame, and power. Worries about *parnasa*, making a living, can also distract a person from the spiritual life. To aid the transition out of the desert into Eretz Yisrael, Moshe said, “We need to have an extraordinary *bris*, a commitment and oath that we will keep the Torah not just in the idyllic, cocoon-like situation of the desert. We will continue to live the Torah in the everyday life of Eretz Yisrael.”

Now, though, the people faced a completely new level of

challenge. It is one thing to say we have to keep Torah in our everyday lives, not just in yeshiva. But now they had just heard the terrible series of curses of Parshas Ki Savo. Now they knew that should they violate the *bris* and sin in Eretz Yisrael, or in Europe, or wherever they would be, they would have horrible experiences: concentration camps, extermination centers, and terrible attacks.

The Jews had made a commitment to keep the Torah under normal conditions. But to keep the Torah after Auschwitz and Treblinka is a different challenge. This is a commitment to keep the Torah despite every curse in the world. “*Kol ha’klala asher lo kasuv b’sefar hazeh.*” The Torah spells out ninety-eight curses but includes all other curses that aren’t written. Could we keep the Torah after that?

The *bris* of Nitzavim is a new commitment that, even if we get so separated from God that we endure, God forbid, Holocaust-level punishments, we will still keep our *bris*. Those of us who survive will retain our love and faith in the Almighty.

F

Generations of Transition

I am the child of Holocaust survivors. I grew up in the generation of the children of the refugees. By and large, the refugees maintained their commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*, despite the challenges and unanswerable questions. Even after the barbarity they had witnessed and the extreme pain and suffering they had endured, they maintained their commitment. No matter what had happened, they lived through the trials of the *bris* and remained strong. This is the power of the *bris* of Nitzavim, to remain strong and committed beyond any comprehension, despite the tragedies that came upon us.

However, as a result of the Holocaust and subsequent transformation, including the move from Europe to Israel and the US

immediately afterwards, my generation experienced a tremendous *yerida* in spirituality. After the Holocaust, the survivors were strong in Torah and *mitzvos* and tried to teach us, the next generation, what it means to be truly Jewish. My generation, though, was much weaker compared to the survivor generation. We don't pray the way they prayed, and we don't run to do *mitzvos* like they did. We might not love Jews like they did; we don't love the Land of Israel like they did. When I grew up, practically all Holocaust survivors were Zionists, with only very few anti-Zionists to be found. Today, in the era of post-Zionism, it is different. Unfortunately, even our love for Israel is weak.

Despite this, we are still keeping the *bris* of Nitzavim; we are committed to Hashem and his Torah. Maybe our level of service is weak, but the core commitment is still there. Shem Mishmuel says Nitzavim is related to the word *matzeiva*, a monument made of solid rock. We have a rock-solid commitment. We don't have the education and social upbringing and society that our grandparents had in Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East. But we are rebuilding. Whenever you rebuild, the structure is weaker. But the foundation is rock-solid. We are committed.

Indeed, we see that our children, the second generation after the Holocaust, has tremendous strength. They have certainty in their mission and a deeper, more developed Judaism. They study much more Torah, and perform more *mitzvos* with more *mesirus nefesh* than us, the first generation after the Holocaust. In our transitional generation, we were strong in our commitment to keep the *bris* going for our children's generation.

G

Renewing the *Bris*

Shem Mishmuel teaches that every Shabbos is a renewal of this *bris*. We are shaken by the secularism and lack of Godliness of

the six days of the week. When Shabbos comes, we return to the *matzeiva*, the strong monument of Torah and *mitzvos*.

H

Standing and Rising

This immutable, unchangeable, and absolute commitment to Torah, even when we are weak, reminds Shem Mishmuel of a Midrash. Shemos Rabba 15 says that Yisrael are like angels, about whom the *navi* says, “*Srafin omdim mima’al lo*. Fiery angels stand above [the heavenly throne].” The verse in the beginning of our *parsha* says about the Jewish people, “You are standing.” This Midrash makes a vague comparison between angel and Jews, both of whom are standing.

Shem Mishmuel explains this with a *Chasiddishe* idea. Zecharya (3:7) says, “*V’nasati lecha mahalchim bein ha’omdim ha’eileh*.” Hashem said to the prophet Zecharya, “I will give you a path to walk upon among these standing [angels].” Angels stand in place; they never change. God puts angels on a pedestal of goodness. They have a certain level of perfection. They have no *yeitzer hara*. An angel never falls. But at the same time, an angel never rises in spirituality. Even though he has intelligence and awareness of God, he can’t grow because he is incapable of making a choice for evil.

People, though, are *mehalchim*. They walk. People climb or fall. They can move backwards and forwards. Hashem tells the *navi*, “You will be a *mehalech*. You will be someone who walks and moves.” The angels, though, are standing still. This is the greatness of the human being. Sure, one can fall spiritually, but one can grow spiritually too. A human being can become even greater than angels. As Chazal say, in the times of Mashiach in Gan Eden, the *tzaddikim* will be closer to Hashem than the *malachim*. This

is the uniqueness of people over angels. A Jew can rise and a Jew can also, God forbid, fall.

What is the point of Nitzavim, according to this Midrash? We must stand strong like the angels. But we must be human. We are supposed to make choices. This is what being a human being is about. Angels stand on a plateau. Our choices help us ascend higher than angels.

I

Choosing Challenge

Our ability to choose is so strong that we can even decide to place ourselves in a situation that challenges us with our choices. Sometimes a person finds himself in a comfortable spiritual place. He wants a challenge, so he moves to a spiritually challenging place. A person should enjoy the challenge of choice. However, this requires a lot of thinking. Should we create artificial challenges for ourselves?

As a teacher in a yeshiva, I sometimes come across parents who say, “I want to challenge my child. I want him to make the right choices even in a challenging environment, so I will send him to a secular college.” Personally, I am apprehensive about these ideas. Sure, they have some merit. Being in challenging situations forces us to make decisions. If we make good choices, then that is wonderful. That’s what being a human being is all about. But we need to be apprehensive about whether we are ready for these choices. If life itself brings us into situations where we face pressures and tests, it means that Hashem is giving us the choice. Hashem says, “You are ready to make a choice. Go ahead.” Then we should, and we will succeed.

But if a person is living in an idyllic situation, in a religious environment, with good friends, surrounded by spiritual people doing good things, he should value his privilege. Hashem didn’t

put him somewhere else. Should he choose to go to a more challenging spiritual environment just for the thrill of the challenge? I personally don't think that I would do that. Only when life itself brings challenges can you have the confidence that you can choose successfully. But don't create such a challenge on your own. You might not be ready. Even King Dovid, who asked Hashem to test him, failed the test (with Batsheva).

J

Loyalty and Commitment

Shem Mishmuel says that we are supposed to be *nitzavim*, firm. Firm in the sense that we don't regress. However, we should be different than angels. We should climb and make ourselves greater and greater in our spiritual development. If life throws difficult challenges at us, even inexplicable disasters like the Holocaust, our commitment must remain rock-solid.

Marriage is also supposed to be this way. For example, two people get married and have a wonderful, happy, active life, and then suddenly one spouse becomes very ill. Would it be moral for the healthy spouse to divorce the sick one? No. When we get married, we want our marriage to be pleasant and beautiful, but sometimes Hashem has other plans. It is a test of commitment. We must be strong. We must be loyal.

This is the level of commitment of Bnei Yisrael to Hashem. This is what Moshe taught us and committed us to in this *parsha*. Whether we live in Europe, America, or Israel during bad times, no matter what comes we will not falter. We will never abandon Hashem, Who has given us the privilege of being His Jewish people and of serving Him.

The Midrash at the beginning of this week's *parsha* compares the Jewish people of Parshas Nitzavim to Yaakov Avinu, who prayed *arvis*, the nighttime prayer. Yaakov prayed in darkness as

he fled from his brother Eisav, who wanted to kill him. He was a yeshiva boy, *yosheiv ohalim*. He lived faithfully with his parents, Yitzchak and Rivka. He did not seek the life of a fugitive. Yet even in his desperate plight, Yaakov prayed and stayed strong. He did not sway from his dedication to Hashem despite the horrific situations he went through. He told Pharaoh, “*Me’at v’raim*, My life was full of bitterness and great challenges. I had few good days.” Nonetheless, Yaakov never wavered in his absolute commitment to Hashem. This is the message of the *parsha* of Nitzavim. We shall not waver in our commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*.

I have a theory that a great deal of the assimilation we witness today results from people losing that commitment. These people tragically want to escape the history of being a Jew. They want to have a pleasant life. But I question whether today’s average gentile has a better life than the average Jew. On a practical level, I don’t think so. Even if assimilated Jews do find a better life, it is a great tragedy. This means they have lost the commitment to be there, no matter what, for other Jews. It is like a husband who divorces his wife because she is sick in the hospital. It is like a father who cuts off his child because the child doesn’t do what the father says. This is the result of not being able to deal with the tragic side of life.

This bitter side of life is nothing but a challenge to live according to our commitments and values. As humans and as Jews our dedication to those values is the key. No challenge should be allowed to change these precious ancient values, regardless how difficult they may be. The difficulties of the Holocaust and the wars in Israel are not enough for us to abandon our basic commitments.

We are very proud of the Jews who refuse to give in. We deeply respect the Jews who will never intermarry, and who remain loyal to the Jewish people and to the State of Israel. These Jews have made the Nitzavim commitment. We are like angels; we will never fall away. We will climb higher, and we will never abandon the most important part of our lives, Torah and *mitzvos*.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is wrong with saying, “God is not with us?”
2. What is the purpose of the two covenants, one at Sinai and the other in Nitzavim?
3. How are people like angels?
4. How are people different than angels?
5. How did the Holocaust generation deal with tragedy?
6. How has the post-Holocaust generation dealt with tragedy?

EXERCISES

1. Think of people who have maintained commitments despite personal tragedy.
2. Mold yourself to be like them in your own commitments.

