

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Nitzavim (Devarim 29:9-30:20)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Nitzavim – The importance of unity

This week's Parasha, Nitzavim, starts as follows: *“You are standing here today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d”* (Devarim 29:9)

Rashi asks why Parshat Nitzavim comes straight after Parashat Ki Tavo, with the dreadful tochacha, the list of 98 curses that we read last week. He explains as follows¹:

“Because when Israel heard these 98 curses [which were listed in Parshat Ki Tavo] ... their faces turned pale and they said “who can endure all of these?” Moshe then began to appease them as follows: “You are standing here today...”

The Midrash Tanchuma explains that the mere fact that Bnei Yisrael were still standing, even though they deserved to be wiped out on a number of occasions, reassures them that they will survive. The Darchai Mussar explains why Bnei Yisrael were still standing despite the curses. The answer lies in the first pasuk of our Parsha which we quoted above: *“You are standing here today, **all of you**”*. The fact that all of Bnei Yisrael were standing together as a single, united people provides sufficient merit to protect Bnei Yisrael from the worst curses.²

We can learn from this the importance of achdut (unity). The Jewish nation together as a whole has a special merit, and we can tap into that by attaching ourselves to the community.

The Midrash in Vayikra Raba compares the generation of King David with the generation of King Achav (the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel). In the time of King David, all of the people were righteous and learned in Torah. Yet, they suffered heavy casualties when they went to war. In contrast, the generation of King Achav was idolatrous. However, they suffered very few casualties when they went out to war. The Midrash explains that this was because the people in King Achav's kingdom behaved respectfully towards each other and they thus merited a special protection from Hashem. Thus, we see that Hashem favours achdut and is pleased when He sees His children acting properly and lovingly to each other. This is just like a parent that receives nachas to see their children being kind to each other.

Achdut is also particularly important in this auspicious time leading up to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Attaching ourselves to the community may reduce the likelihood of us standing out and thus potentially suffering extra scrutiny which would highlight our inevitable sins and faults.

The prophet Elisha used to visit the town of Shunam regularly³. One of the residents, known only as the Shunamite woman, suggested to her husband that they build a special room for the prophet so that they could host him whenever he visited the town. Elisha was very grateful. He offered to intercede on the woman's behalf for anything that she needed. The Shunamite woman initially declined the offer, saying *“I sit in the midst of my people”*. The Zohar explains that this

¹ Rashi to Devarim 29:12.

² This idea came from The Short Vort, by Rabbi Moshe Kormornick.

³ Melachim II (4:8-14).

story took place on Rosh Hashana. The Shunamite woman didn't want to "stand out" for personal scrutiny at this auspicious time. She preferred to attach herself to the community and blend in.⁴ Similarly, Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Branovitch wanted to keep a low profile during the time of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. He avoided being called up to the Torah during this time so as to avoid drawing undue attention to himself.⁵ The Shunamite woman and Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman both understood the value of the community in enabling us as individuals to blend in rather than stand out and be scrutinised.

How do we attach ourselves to the community?

We need to actively avoid machloket, divisiveness and baseless hatred. Let's think about where divisiveness amongst the Jewish people comes from. People who are different from us often make us feel uncomfortable. If we look closely, we will see that what drives us apart is usually just minhag at best – the style of davening, the clothes we wear, the way we talk. But the mitzvah of v'ahavta l'reicha kamocho, loving our fellow like ourselves, is not just a minhag, it is a mitzvah mid'oraita, one of the 613 Torah level mitzvot. Hashem wants us to love each other and respect each other. This is much more important than which particular stream of Judaism we happen to belong to, or the chumras that we have adopted.

Second, we can try to actively foster achdut. We need to strive to feel united with others in our heart, even with those people that make us feel a bit uncomfortable. We have to remember that one of the Hebrew words for community is Tzibbur, which stands for Tzadik, Beinoni and Rasha. A community consists of all types of Jews - righteous, wicked and those in the middle. All of us come together to form a community. At the beginning of Yom Kippur, just before the Kol Nidrei prayer, we specifically invite the wicked to join us in our communal prayer.⁶

Finally, we can seek to actively join with the community and look for ways to help others. Whether it is helping people in need, volunteering for our shule or other acts of communal chessed, these acts on behalf of the community will help us to foster a love and thus a unity with the community. As Rav Dessler teaches,⁷ the Hebrew word for love (Ahava) includes the root 'Hav' which means 'to give'. This teaches us that giving leads to love. If we give to our community, we will increase our love for our community.

Let's try something this week, in the short time remaining before Rosh Hashana:

1. Actively remember the message of Nitzavim. If we all stand together, united, this creates a special merit that can pull us all individually through this time of judgement.
2. Try to attach ourselves to our community. Think about what we can do to strengthen our community and help each other.

Darchai Noam will take a break for the Chagim. I wish everyone a Shana Tova U'metuakh, G'mar Chatimah Tova and Chag Sameach!

The next Darchai Noam will B"H be for the week of Parashat Noach (2 November / 4 Cheshvan).

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Elisha did daven for the woman and she was blessed with a son, who was Yonah the prophet.

⁵ Heard from Rav Moshe Donnebaum, Melbourne Australia.

⁶ See page 58 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz Yom Kippur machzor.

⁷ See section 4 in the essay on "Lovingkindness", Strive for Truth, Part One, p126.