

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Nitzavim
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Nitzavim – All together

Last week's Parasha of K Tavo contained the chilling list of curses that was waiting for Bnei Yisrael if they did not serve Hashem faithfully. Unlike the previous list of curses, set out in Parashat Bechukotai, this list does not end with any comforting promises. It must have been a frightening experience for Bnei Yisrael to hear this. What hope was there for their survival?

The answer is given in the opening words of this week's Parasha:

*You are **all** standing this day before the Hashem, your G-d, the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp, both your woodcutters and your water drawers... (Devarim 29:9-10)*

All of Bnei Yisrael were standing **together**, the entire people, from the leaders, all the way down to the woodcutters and water drawers.¹ The Darchai Mussar² writes that this unity protects Bnei Yisrael and ensures that they receive a favourable judgement.

The Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh notes that the curses that were listed in Parashat Bechukotai were written in the plural while the curses in last week's Parasha were in the singular. He explains that the first list of curses applied to the nation as a whole. Bnei Yisrael is guaranteed to survive due to the covenant between Hashem and the Avot. That is why the first list ends with words of comfort. However the list in our Parasha is directed at individuals. Individual Jews are not guaranteed survival and therefore there is no comforting words at the end of this list.³ However, as individuals, we do have some comfort - we have the pasuk that we discussed above: “You are **all** standing this day...” The comfort for individuals is that they can be protected by joining with the community. If we, as individuals, want to maximise our chances for a good judgement on Rosh Hashanah, then we should attach ourselves to the community. This can include identifying with the community, praying with the community⁴, volunteering for the community, or just looking around at what needs to be done and then doing it.

How can this work? Simply by attaching to the community, will Hashem overlook our sins? The Gemara⁵ teaches us that whoever says that Hashem is a vatran (i.e. that He overlooks sins), his life will be erased.⁶ The Gemara then quotes the pasuk “The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice”. So how can we expect Hashem to overlook our sins merely because we identify with the community?

Part of the answer may be that Hashem imposes justice in accordance with another important principle – the principle of middah k'neged middah. Hashem treats us the way that we treat others. If we focus on the shortcomings of others, then Hashem will focus on our shortcomings. On the other hand, if we overlook the

¹ These were Canaanites who pretended that they had come from a far-away country and attempted to deceive Moshe. But they did not succeed in their deception and Moshe did not accept them to be Jews. Rather, Moshe made them woodcutters and water drawers (i.e., slaves for Bnei Israel). See Rashi to this verse, and Rashi to Gittin 23b.

² Rav Yaakov Neiman - passed away in 1983, Rosh Yeshiva of the Ohr Yisroel Yeshiva, originally in Europe and later in Petach Tikva, Israel.

³ Words of comfort do come later, in the beginning of Chapter 30, when Moshe assures Bnei Yisrael that they will eventually do teshuva and be redeemed.

⁴ Or staying home to look after the children so that the community can concentrate on their prayers!

⁵ Baba Kama 50a.

⁶ The quote from the Gemara is a play on words – “Anyone who says that the Holy One, Blessed is He, is a vatran (forgiving [of sins] - וְתָרַן), his life will be erased (יִבְטָר - וְיִתְרָן).”

deficiencies of others, then Hashem will overlook our deficiencies. When we work for the community and involve ourselves in contributing to others, we are declaring by our actions that we don't care about their inevitable shortcomings. We are working for the community despite the fact that individual members of the community may have failures and weaknesses and middot of which we don't approve. In return, Hashem will treat us as part of Am Yisrael and reduce the focus on our individual failings.

Another part of the answer may be that, as any parent knows, there is no greater feeling for a parent than when their children are getting on well with each other. A parent who is happily watching his children care for each other is willing to overlook some indiscretions. Similarly, we can only imagine the pleasure that Hashem attains when He sees His children helping each other and working together for the common good.

Indeed, we open up the prayers for Yom Kippur with an invitation to the sinners to join us for prayer. The very first thing that we say at the beginning of the Kol Nidrei prayer is "With the approval of the Omnipresent and with the approval of the congregation, in the Court above and in the Court below, we permit prayer with the transgressors."⁷ On Yom Kippur everyone is welcome to join the community to pray for forgiveness. And it is worth remembering the beautiful idea that צבור (community) is an acronym which stands for צדיקים (righteous), ביניים (the intermediate) and רשעים (the wicked). A community includes everyone, regardless of our level. And when the community recites the viduy (confession of sins), we always speak in the plural: "**We** have become guilty, **we** have betrayed, **we** have robbed" and על חטא – "For the sin that **we** have sinned before you" etc. We are taking responsibility for our sins as a community.

Let's have a brief look at what the sources say about those who work for the community.

The Mishnah in Pirkai Avot⁸ teaches us as follows: "All who exert themselves for the community should exert themselves for the sake of Heaven, for them the merit of the forefathers comes to their aid, for their righteousness will endure forever".

The Maharal explains that Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov actually come to the aid of those who work for the community. They help us because we are helping to take care of their descendants. Rashi adds that even though the merit of the community is responsible for the good that was achieved, the public servant still receives the reward as if they had done all of the work themselves. And the Rambam adds that someone who is busy working for the good of the community can be too busy to perform other mitzvot. Nevertheless, they receive the reward as if they had performed those mitzvot as well.

Jews who serve the public receive a special tefilla from all of klal Yisrael after the Torah reading on Shabbat morning: "...and all who are involved faithfully in the needs of the community – may the Holy One, Blessed is He, pay their reward and remove from them every affliction, heal their entire body and forgive their every sin, and send blessing and success to all their handiwork"⁹. What a beautiful tefilla. And we can each be a beneficiary of this tefilla, just by being involved faithfully in the needs of the community.

Let's try something this week:

1. As we get closer to Rosh Hashanah, let's try to attach ourselves to our community and thereby take advantage of this segula for a favourable judgement.
2. Look around and ask yourself what the Jewish community needs, and think about what you can do to help.

Darchai Noam will take a short break for the chagim. B"H we will return next year with Parashat Noach. Wishing you all a Shana Tova, Gmar Chamita Tova and Chag Sameach!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁷ See p59 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz Yom Kippur machzor.

⁸ Chapter 2, Mishnah 2.

⁹ See the שברך מי prayer which appears right after יקום פורקן on page 450 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.