

# *Parshas Nitzavim*

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## *1. Unity is the Basis for the Success of the Jewish People*

The Torah states, **“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G’d...”** The Jewish people stood united before G’d as one. The Midrash explains, “There are times when the day is illuminated and times when it is dark – good times and difficult times; however ultimately G’d will bring upon us the ultimate light. As it states in the verse, “Hashem will bring that special light upon us.” When will He bring that light upon us? When all of the Jewish people is united as one group. As it states in the verse, “you will live, all of you, this day.” It is a known fact that if one were to bundle twigs together, it is not possible to break the bundle. However the twigs individually can be broken by even a small child. The same is true for the Jewish people. They will ultimately merit redemption when they will be united as one. As it states in the verse in Jeremiah, “...the day that the Children of Israel will come together – when they are bonded together as one – they will merit the Divine Presence to be among them.” The Torah is communicating to us that we can endure any difficulty if we, as a Jewish people, are united as one. However if we function as individuals and are not intertwined with one another, then we are vulnerable.

It is interesting to note that the portion begins with the covenant of *“kol Yisroel areivum ze la ze* – everyone is responsible for his fellow” - every Jew is responsible for his fellow Jew. Based on this principle, if a Jew did not fulfill his mitzvah obligation (certain ones), his fellow may do it on his behalf- thus guaranteeing that every Jew will be able to fulfill his obligation. Similarly every Jew is culpable for his fellow’s failing. If he can intercede in order to prevent him from transgressing one must do so. Because when one Jew fails the entire Jewish people are diminished and affected negatively – just as if one Jew advances spiritually the entire Jewish people are elevated.

On a simple level, the concept of *“kol Yisroel areivum ze la ze* – everyone is responsible for his fellow” ensures that every Jew will fulfill his obligation and avoid transgression. However, the concept of *“kol Yisroel areivum ze la ze*” extends beyond this aspect of communal responsibility. *Kol Yisroel areivum ze la ze* is a concept rooted in the unity of the Jewish people. If a Jew is responsible for his fellow, he will view him as an extension of himself. The fact that each Jew is responsible for his fellow is a factor that binds all of the Jewish people as one entity. The Torah is telling us that when the Jewish people are united as one – that is the time they will be standing before G’d.

There is an obligation to emulate the ways of G’d- “Just as He is Merciful, you must be merciful. Just as He is Gracious, you must be gracious...” It is a Positive Commandment to emulate G’d in every way possible. The more the Jew reflects the characteristics of G’d there is a basis for a relationship between G’d and the Jew. When there is a commonality between the Jew and G’d is it the time when the relationship is closest. When the Jewish people are united as one it reflects the unity of G’d- thus they are assuming the posture of G’d. As we say in the Mincha prayer on Shabbos – “You are One and Your Name is One; and who is like Your people Israel, one nation on earth.” The Gemara tells us in Tractate Berachos that G’d wears tefillin. The Gemara asks, what verses are contained in G’d’s tefillin? The Gemara answers - who is like Your people

Israel, one nation on earth – which emphasizes the uniqueness of the Jewish people. It is because the Jewish people are unified (in their beliefs and responsibility for one another) that they attached directly to G'd the Eternal Being- thus making the Jewish people the eternal people.

The only way the Jewish people could merit the ultimate redemption is to be unified as one people.

## ***2. Life Has No Middle Ground***

The Torah states, **“See- I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil, that which I command you today, to love Hashem your G'd to walk in His ways...”** Sforno explains that “blessing” is something that goes beyond what is adequate while “curse” is something that is less than what is needed. There is no “middle ground” – either something is blessing or curse- good or evil. Why should there be no middle ground? It is true that one may not be engaged continuously in mitzvah activity, but at the same time, he is not transgressing. Why should that be regarded as something evil?

Yeshaya the Prophet states, “I (G'd) created this existence for My glory.” Meaning the only purpose of this world is to glorify G'd – every moment in this existence must be invested properly with the intent of glorifying G'd. G'd gave man the ability to chose between good and evil. Ramchal explains that man has the ability to transgress against G'd in the most extreme manner and G'd Himself gives man this ability to bring about a desecration of His Name. It is because of this ability to choose to do the most extreme negative action that there is value to performing mitzvos. If it were not for the ability to chose between good and evil, the value of either would be meaningless. Thus, in order to give man the opportunity to bring about the ultimate glorification of G'd's Name, He gave man the ability to choose to transgress at the most extreme level.

In the morning blessing of the Shema we say, “He renews, in His Goodness daily, perpetually, the work of creation.” Meaning, the world continues to exists not because it existed a moment ago; but rather, it is because G'd continuously Will's its existence every moment. We see from the words of the Prophet that one must invest his life in glorifying G'd. Thus, if creation is renewed every moment and its purpose is to glorify G'd then if one is not dedicated to that goal every moment he is not fulfilling his purpose. Therefore there cannot be a “middle ground.” If one is not engaged in doing the Will of G'd every moment – then by definition he is not fulfilling his purpose or the purpose of existence.

The verse states, **“See- I have placed before you today the life and the good...to love Hashem your G'd to walk in His ways...”** If one loves G'd and emulates His ways, then he is

engaged in the good/life. If one turns his heart away from G'd then it brings about evil. Ramban writes that initially the heart of man was naturally inclined to do the Will of G'd. However, after the sin of Adam, the heart became impaired, tainted and covered with impurity. The heart began to lust after things that are contrary to the Will of G'd. The Torah tells us that at the time of Moshiach, the impure covering of the heart will be removed and the heart will be restored to its original nature of doing the Will of G'd. Although the original nature of the heart is to love G'd, the tainted heart causes man to love himself above all else. Thus while man has the potential capacity to love G'd with all of his heart and to dedicate himself totally to His service, he is more inclined to focus completely on his own needs and desires.

The Torah needs to tell us that the only way to bring about the good/ life and not evil/death is to love G'd. One will either overcome his inclination and love G'd – thus bringing about the good - or be distracted by the tainted heart and pursue the material/evil, which one is inclined to do. It is only a matter of conditioning. Since the heart constantly seeks something to love one must continuously satisfy that desire with the love of G'd.

One cannot assume a neutral posture. One must dedicate every aspect of his life to G'd. Eating, sleeping, earning a livelihood can all be regarded as mitzvah activity if the intent is to utilize the activity as a means to bring about the glorification of G'd. However if one's involvement with the material is solely for its own sake, then it brings about evil/death because it is utilizing existence for something other than its purpose.

### ***3. Going Beyond Realization***

The Torah states, **“It will be that when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you – then you will take it to heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G'd, has dispersed you; and you will return unto Hashem...”** The dispersion of the Jewish people into exile is unparalleled by any other people. In this state of exile, G'd brings blessing and curse upon them so that they should reflect upon their situation and fully comprehend their predicament and thus take it to heart. It is only after the Jewish people have reflected and introspected that they will do *teshuvah* (repent).

Sforno explains the term “take it to heart” to mean that one must introspect in a serious manner in order to discern between truth and falseness. It is only when one assesses and evaluates himself to that degree that he will realize that he is not as righteous as he believed himself to be. There are many areas that one does fall short. In addition to the obvious transgressions such as *lashon hara* (evil speech), there are many failings, which we do not sense – such as performing mitzvos (by rote) without the proper intent, or not sufficiently engaging in Torah study.

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that after one passes away, he stands

before the heavenly court to be judged. He is first asked, “Did you deal honestly in business? And did you set fixed times for the study of Torah?” And then he is asked other questions about his entire life – what he did or did not do properly. Thus, one must take his behavior to heart (introspection) and repent before passing away.

In the Portion of Ki Savo, the *Tochacha* relates what G’d will bring upon one who does not adhere to the Torah. **“Hashem will strike you with madness and with blindness, and with a confounding of heart.”** Rashi explains the term “confounding of heart” to mean that G’d will seal one’s heart. This means that he will have no sensitivity or receptivity to spirituality. Therefore, one must introspect (“take to heart”) so that the curse of “confounding of the heart” does not come about.

The heart unfortunately desires many things; some are in accordance with the Torah while others are not. We ask G’d in the blessings of the Shema to “Designate our hearts exclusively to love/fear Him (G’d).” The Chofetz Chaim uses an allegory to explain the meaning of the heart “exclusively” loving/fearing G’d. A diamond dealer who specialized in large and precious stones approaches a third party to safeguard a chest of diamonds for him while he is away. The diamond dealer explains to this individual that his stones are wrapped in a silk cloth within the chest. After hearing how special these stones are, the perspective custodian asked if he could admire them while they are in his possession. The diamond dealer agrees. The custodian, unable to contain his curiosity, opens the box and unwraps the silk cloth, which contains the rare, precious diamonds. As he is unwrapping the stones he notices that they are intermingled with pieces of putrid and decaying food. He is taken aback at the lunacy of the diamond dealer keeping such precious stones intermixed with such putrid matter.

One may have Torah and spirituality in his heart and a willingness to do the Will of G’d. However, simultaneously, he may also possess other desires and interests, which are contrary to the Torah. This is the equivalent of containing something of infinite value with something that is abominable in the same location. Thus we pray to G’d to “Designate our hearts” to exclusively love and fear Him and to be devoid of anything that is contrary to that.

The Torah states that one must “take it to heart” and repent. However if one’s heart has no sense of spirituality it would be virtually impossible to introspect on one’s behavior and do proper teshuvah. Therefore we pray to G’d to open our hearts (to spirituality) and to designate them exclusively to do His Will. It is only when G’d gives us a sense of spirituality that we can truly reflect on our past behavior and do teshuvah.

#### ***4. Silence – The Ultimate Indicator***

The Torah states, **“The hidden (sins) are for Hashem, our G’d, but the revealed (sins) are for us and our children forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah.”**

Although the Jewish people had entered into the covenant of communal responsibility for one another, there was no culpability to others if one individual had sinned in private. However, if an individual had sinned when others were aware, then there is communal culpability.

There are dots that appear in the sefer Torah over the words *“lanu u l’vaneinu - for us and our children.”* Rashi explains that the significance of these dots is to teach us that, “Even regarding the sins that are known to others, the Jewish people were not culpable for them until after they had crossed the Jordan.”

One of the most serious failings of the Jewish people was the Sin of the Golden Calf, which occurred shortly after they had left Egypt. The Jewish people were held culpable for this serious breach and transgression. It is important to note that although the vast majority of the Jewish people did not actually participate in the idolatrous behavior, there was communal accountability, which caused them to forfeit the special level of spirituality attained at Sinai. The actual idol worshippers were either killed by the sword or perished after drinking water that contained the dust of the Golden Calf.

Since this infraction occurred nearly 40 years before the Jewish people crossed the Jordan, why were they all culpable and deserving of extinction for the Sin of the Golden Calf? There are a number of sins, which occurred throughout the desert-wandering period in which the entire Jewish people were reprimanded and criticized for the failings of the few. How do we understand this? According to Rashi the Jewish people were not communally responsible for one another until after the covenant at *Har Greezim*. In addition, the Torah relates several incidents in the desert in which the entire Jewish people were held culpable for sins which were committed in public. How do we understand this?

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that at the time of the destruction of the Temple, G’d had instructed the Angel of Death to paint the letter “tuf” in red on the foreheads of all of the *rashaim* (evil people) so that they should be marked for death. However, regarding the *tzaddikim* (righteous people) G’d instructed the Angel of Death to paint the letter “tuf” in black to indicate that they should be spared. Satan complained to G’d that the *tzaddikim* should also be marked with the letter “tuf” in red for death because they did not intercede and protest to prevent the *rashaim* from sinning. They remained silent. Thus they also deserved to die. G’d responded to satan that even if the *tzaddikim* had protested, their admonishments would not have been heeded. Satan responded, “Although it is true what You say, the *tzaddikim* did not know that their rebuke would have been ignored and fallen on deaf ears. Since they did not protest, the *tzaddikim* also deserve to die.” G’d concurred with satan. Is this culpability a consequence of Jews being responsible for one another or is it due to some other failing?

The Prophet Yechezkel states, “The reason the communities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed was because they did not extend their hand to the poor.” They did not give charity nor did they have compassion for the needy. Reb Elchonon Wasserman z’tl asks, “Since giving charity is not one of the Seven Noachide Laws, why ‘should the communities of Sodom and Gomorrah be held accountable and destroyed for not providing for the needy?” Reb Elchonon explains that there are certain mitzvot that one does not need to be commanded to perform. For example, if one witnesses the suffering of his fellow, he does not need to be instructed to assist him. Since the human being was created with the innate ability to have compassion, to act indifferently is considered cruelty. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah witnessed their fellows being deprived at an extreme level and did nothing to assist them. Thus, they deserved to be destroyed.

When the sin of the Golden Calf was being perpetrated, even if one was not actively involved in its worship, nevertheless, there was culpability. After G’d communicated with every Jew face to face at Sinai, how was it possible that the same people could witness His Name being disgraced to such a degree and remain silent? How could they allow this abomination to be brought into their midst and not intervene? Therefore, remaining silent is considered *their own failing* and unrelated to the concept of Jews being responsible for one another (communal responsibility).

The concept of “*Yisroel areivim zeh l’zeh- Jews are responsible for one another*” is that the failing of one Jew is considered the failing of another. If one could have prevented his fellow from transgressing and he did not – it is considered his failing. Unlike the Sin of the Golden Calf, the sin of the idolaters is not transposed to those who remained silent.

Bilaam, Yisro, and Iyov (Job) were the three advisors to Pharaoh. Bilaam had recommended the enslavement of the Jewish people as the solution to controlling their proliferation in Egypt. Pharaoh agreed that this suggestion should be implemented immediately. When Yisro became aware of this, he fled Egypt to go to Midian as a sign of protest. Iyov, the third advisor, remained silent. We read about the overwhelming suffering of Iyov. It was because of his silence when the bondage began that he suffered to the degree that he did. Iyov’s rationale to remain silent was – even if he had protested, Pharaoh would not have listened to him. He believed that enslavement would have gone forward regardless of his displeasure.

Iyov had lost his children, his wife, his wealth and he suffered physically. The Brisker Rav z’tl explains how to correlate the “measure for measure” of Iyov’s silence with his suffering. G’d initially had asked him after “After seeing such an evil being perpetrated, how could you have remained silent?” Iyov’s response to G’d was, “Even if I would have protested it would have accomplished nothing. Therefore I remained silent.” G’d said, “I understand your position.”

Subsequently, Iyov experienced many serious setbacks and personal tragedies. He was at a point when he was writhing in pain and crying out when G'd said to him, "Why are you crying and screaming?" Iyov responded, "I cry because I am in pain." G'd then asked him, "When you cry does it alleviate your pain?" Then G'd said, "It is clear that when one is in pain one cries. Therefore it is only an indication that you were not pained in Egypt when you remained silent and did not protest against the unconscionable measures that were taken against the Jews,

When the Jewish people were violating the Torah in its entirety during the Temple period, the tzaddikim remained silent and did not attempt to intercede. Although it would not have made a difference even if they had (as G'd said to satan); nevertheless, their silence is an indication that they were not affected and pained by the desecration of G'd's Name that was being brought about by their fellows. Thus, because of their own failing they did deserve to die with the *rashaim*.

The principle of "One Jew is responsible for his fellow Jew" only has relevance when one could prevent his fellow from transgressing and he does not make the effort. In this case, the one who did not intercede is culpable for the sin of his fellow. However, the other situations cited above do not fall under this category. They are examples in which silence indicated insensitivity to the *chillul Hashem* (desecration of G'd's Name) that was taking place.

There are many situations in which we need to be anguished - whether it is the problem of assimilation, which is tragic and catastrophic, or other problems affecting the Jewish people as a whole. Many Jews are being alienated continuously from their heritage. Are we truly pained by this or is its value simply table talk?

## 5. *Choosing Life*

The Torah states, "**I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse – choose life so that you will live, you and your offspring...**" Moshe presented the Jewish people with the choice "to live" or "die" and to be "blessed" or "cursed." He then encouraged them to choose life. Why did Moshe need to encourage the Jewish people to choose life? Is it not obvious that when one is presented with a choice that he will choose life? Evidently, one may have a different understanding of "life" and "death." Since the correct perception is not clear, Moshe needs to encourage the Jewish people to choose life as the Torah defines it.

Rashi cites Chazal who explain "**choose life...**" to mean, "I (G'd) am directing you to choose the path of life as a father tells his son – when you choose a portion from

my estate, choose for yourself the best portion.” Chazal depict G’d’s encouragement and urging as a father advising His son to do what is in the best interest of His child (the Jewish people). One must be cognizant of the father/child relationship between G’d and the Jewish people- just as a parent is selflessly dedicated to the welfare of the child so too is G’d dedicated to the well being and spiritual advancement of the Jewish people. A Jew must feel that G’d’s encouragement and mandate is in his best interest, even though he may not realize it.

The Torah perspective of life is that existence is only a means to an end – which is to develop oneself spiritually. As the Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) states, “Make your Torah study primary and your work secondary.” Physical existence is only the precursor to the spiritual existence, which is the world to come. One tenet of Judaism is that there is a world to come. Therefore, a person must utilize the physical for the performance of mitzvos in order to be spiritually developed.

The essence of the Jew is his spirituality; however, we are in constant conflict between that and our inclination, which is for the physical. Because of this continuous conflict we are not able to perceive our spiritual perfection as the ultimate goal. We naturally only see what we are giving up to achieve the spiritual rather than seeing this as an investment in our eternal existence. Therefore, Moshe must urge and encourage us to “choose life” which is not fully appreciated as such. As physical beings we do not have the natural sensitivity to spirituality. How does one achieve sensitivity to spirituality thereby enabled to choose “life”?

We say in the closing blessing of requests in the Amidah (Silent Prayer), “Hear our voice, Hashem our G’d, pity and be compassionate to us, and accept- with compassion and favor- our prayer, for G’d Who hears prayers and supplications are You.” It is in this blessing that one usually takes the opportunity to beseech G’d for all his material needs. However in the blessing that precedes the Shema (*ahava raba*) we beseech G’d by saying, “Our Father, the merciful Father, Who acts mercifully, have mercy upon us, instill in our hearts to understand and elucidate, to listen, learn, teach, safeguard, perform, and fulfill all the words of Your Torah’s teaching with love.” We identify G’d as the “merciful Father” and then we beseech Him to open our hearts and eyes to His Torah (which is the source of our spirituality) as if we are in a life threatening situation. Why do we beseech Him in such a fervent and intense manner?

It is because only G’d can assist us to open our hearts and eyes to appreciate what life truly is. Just as we beseech Him for our personal needs in the Amidah, we must also sense that same urgency of need regarding our spirituality. We need His Assistance to give us clarity despite our natural conflicts of interest towards the physical.

The Gemara in Tractate Makkos states, “On the path that one chooses to walk, he will be led.” If one (G’d forbid) chooses to lead a life of crime G’d will provide him with

many opportunities to do so. On the other hand, if one truly wishes to lead a spiritual life then G'd will assist him because it is his aspiration. G'd will give him all that is necessary to be able to recognize "life" to make the proper choice.

## 6. *The Duality of Every Mitzvah*

The Torah tells us that during the first day of Chol HaMoed Succos of the eighth year (the year after the first Shmitta cycle), the entire Jewish people (men, women, and children) must gather on the Temple Mount to hear the reading of *Mishna Torah* (The Book of Devarim) by the King of Israel. This Positive Commandment is referred to as *Hakhail*. The Torah states that the purpose of this reading is, "So that they (the Jewish people) should listen and learn to fear Hashem." The mitzvah of *Hakhail* is to listen and understand the Torah, thus giving the Jewish people a sense of who G'd is so that they should fear Him. It is evident that the only way one comes upon the fear of G'd (*yiras shamayim*) is through Torah study. Without the proper Torah study it is not possible to truly fear G'd.

Rabbeinu Yonah explains in his commentary on Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) and in his work *Shaarei Teshuvah* (Gates of Repentance) that all mitzvos of the Torah are "*parperaos* (appetizers)" to *yiras shamayim* (fear of heaven). He explains that when a Jew performs mitzvos it is only because G'd has commanded him to do so. Thus, every mitzvah action is a demonstration of one's reverence and fear of G'd. Without possessing the knowledge of mitzvos through Torah study one cannot demonstrate his *yiras shamayim* through observance. Whenever one performs a mitzvah he is simultaneously doing two things: the fulfillment of the mitzvah itself and the mitzvah to fear G'd.

The *Navi* (Prophet) addresses the issue of mitzvos that are performed by rote- out of habit without the sense of the mitzvah or its service. If one is conditioned in the performance of mitzvos and thus only does so out of habit, he does not have the sense that he is doing them to do the Will of G'd. The *Navi* therefore strongly admonishes the Jewish people for performing mitzvos in this manner. If the Jewish people are performing their mitzvah obligation, albeit not at an advanced level, why should the Prophet reprimand them for lack of quality performance? Obviously, it must be that performing mitzvos in a habitual manner is considered a serious failing. How do we understand this?

It is evident from the verse, "**So that they (the Jewish people) should listen and learn to fear Hashem**" that one must study Torah in order to perform mitzvos for their primary purpose, which is an expression of one's *yiras shamayim*. The value of the mitzvah itself is secondary. If one performs a mitzvah by rote, it does not communicate one's *yiras shamayim*.

Rambam writes in Hilchos Berachos (The Laws of Blessings) that all blessings are rabbinic enactments, except for the blessing after meals. The Jew is obliged to recite a

blessing before he partakes of food as well as after he finishes eating. Additionally, there are many other categories of blessings that one must recite depending on circumstance. Rambam explains that the reason the Rabbis enacted the continuous opportunity to recite blessings is to enable the Jew to be cognizant of G'd's Presence throughout his day and in all of his endeavors.

A Jew must always have a consciousness of G'd's Presence. As we find stated in the Gemara in Tractate Berachos, "Whoever benefits from this world without a blessing, it is considered as if he benefited from something that was consecrated." If one benefits from a consecrated item it is considered a serious Torah transgression, which has many repercussions. The world in its entirety belongs to G'd. As King David states in Psalms, "The world in its entirety is G'd's." It is only after one acknowledges that the world is G'd's that he is then permitted to partake of it.

The only way one can have a continuous sense of G'd's Presence is through Torah study. This leads to the performance of mitzvos, whose ultimate purpose is to express one's *yiras shamayim*.