

TIMELESS TORAH

NITZAVIM VAYEILECH :

THE COURAGE TO CONTINUE: FINDING THE STRENGTH TO MOVE FORWARD

Timeless Leadership

There is something striking about the opening of Parshat Nitzavim. Moshe Rabbeinu knows that he is about to die. He knows that he will not enter the Promised Land, and that Yehoshua will soon take his place as leader. Yet his response is not to withdraw. Instead, he gathers the entire nation together: ‘*Atem Nitzavim kulchem hayom*, All of you are standing here today’ (29:9).

This final gathering makes a central point about Moshe’s leadership. He is not simply preparing the people for his departure. He is making sure that they have what they need to continue without him. Rashi offers three interpretations of the purpose of this gathering, each highlighting a different way in which Moshe prepares the Jewish people for the moment when he will no longer be there to guide them.

Firstly, Rashi writes that Moshe brought them together to enter the *brit arvut*, the covenant of communal responsibility that would ensure a national commitment to observing Hashem’s Word. Secondly, in an aggadic interpretation, Rashi explains that Moshe was comforting them after the curses of the *Tochachah* (Admonition). His message was that there was no need for disheartenment: after all the setbacks of the last forty years in the Wilderness, the Jewish people had not perished, and Hashem would continue to preserve them no matter how far they might stray. Finally, Rashi writes that this was Moshe’s valedictory address. As he passed the baton of leadership to Yehoshua, he called the people together to create a memorable occasion that they could look back on for inspiration.

At this major turning point in Jewish history, Moshe was giving the people three points of reference – past, present and future – with which they could encourage themselves.

The *brit arvut* would solidify communal support and cohesion, reflecting on their history would allow them to put their present circumstances into perspective, and the change of leadership would motivate them to look towards the future with confidence.

Following this line of analysis, the Malbim (d. 1879) understands the final verse of this passage as an enduring message of fortitude. After describing the consequences of exile, the verse states, ‘*Hanistarot LaHashem Elokeinu, v’haniglot lanu... laasot et kol divrei haTorah hazot* – the hidden things are for Hashem, our God, and the revealed things are for us... to observe all the words of this Torah’ (29:28). The Malbim explains that Hashem might have His hidden reasons for bringing the seeming devastation of exile. What is ‘revealed to us’, however, is the necessity of remaining strong and faithful to the Torah that has forever been our ‘portable homeland’.

Choice to Change

Towards the end of Parshat Nitzavim, a series of beautiful verses discusses the responsibility we have to make the correct choices in life. Read in the light of the above comments, they offer guidance on how we can develop the resolve to remain faithful to the Torah.

The verse begins, ‘*Re’eh natati lifneichem hayom et hachaim v’et hatov... – See, I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil*’. This is the ultimate crossroads facing anyone who embarks on a spiritual journey. But why does the Torah emphasise the word ‘today’?

Rav Moshe Feinstein (d.1986) suggests that a person should place this choice – between good and evil, life and death – before them not only when facing major dilemmas. Each



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day should be considered an opportunity for a fresh start. Rather than waiting for a significant event to achieve this, 'today' and every day one can make the choice to change.

Sometimes, though, consistent, day-to-day choices need inspiration. The subsequent passage in the Torah, at the beginning of Parshat Vayeilech, describes the majestic moment of *Hakhel*. Once every seven years, on the Sukkot following the shemittah year, the entire nation – men, women and children – gathers in the Beit HaMikdash to learn and celebrate the mitzvot of the Torah.

Seemingly, the timing of this mitzvah is connected to the shemittah year because, during that year, the people are generally more focused on studying the Torah. But the Meshech Chochmah (d.1926) raises a intriguing point. The *Hakhel* reading takes place not at the start of the shemittah year, but in the first weeks of the new year following shemittah. By then, the inspiration of the previous year might already be beginning to wane as people look towards rebuilding their farms. It is precisely at this moment, says the Meshech Chochmah, that the Torah gives us the opportunity of *Hakhel* to reflect on the lessons of shemittah. Shemittah may have taught them to stop, but *Hakhel* ensured that what they had learned would continue to shape the way they lived when they started again.

Come Young, Come Old

The mitzvah of *Hakhel* is unique in its inclusivity; the verses specifically state that all members of Klal Yisrael are to take part, regardless of age or stage in life. An anecdote related in the Gemara (Chagigah 3a) highlights this point.

Two great Talmudic sages travelled to visit their teacher, Rabbi Yehoshua, in Pekiin, a town in northern Israel. When they arrived,

Rabbi Yehoshua asked them to repeat one of the lessons taught in the great Beit Midrash in Yavneh while he had been absent. The sages told him that the sages in Yavneh had discussed why children should take part in *Hakhel*. Adults would obviously come to learn, but why bring children?

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah answered that the children should be brought solely to bring reward to those who brought them. Rabbi Yehoshua was moved to tears and exclaimed that he considered this lesson 'a precious jewel'.

The Meshech Chochmah explains that Rabbi Yehoshua's response was personal. The Jerusalem Talmud (Yevamot, Chap. 1) relates that when he was a baby, his mother used to bring his cradle into the Beit Midrash so that his young ears would absorb the words of Torah. Although he could not understand them, the atmosphere of Torah study left an impression that remained with him throughout his life. When Rabbi Yehoshua heard this interpretation of *Hakhel*, he finally understood the wisdom of his mother's actions.

The Imrei Emet (fourth Gerrer Rebbe, d. 1948) points out that the verses themselves explain that the children would also be able to learn Torah in some form during *Hakhel*, unlike the explanation of the Gemara. He explains that the Gemara means that even in an era in which young children would not be capable of learning, their parents should still bring them along. The inspiration of *Hakhel*, the atmosphere of a Beit Midrash and the experience of an uplifting moment in shul all remind us that some of the most important moments in education come from simply being present.

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