

PARSHAS SHOFTIM 5777

We are in the midst of the seven weeks between Tisha B'av and Rosh Hashono. Before Tisha B'av we have three weeks of reading haftarahs of destruction. After Tisha B'av the gemara in Megilla says we are to read seven special haftarahs of consolation during these weeks. In the first of these haftarahs we read "Nachamu nachamu ami." Hashem sends Klal Yisroel a message of nechomo through the novi. In the next haftarah of Parshas Eikev, Klal Yisroel responds in bewilderment: what kind of nechomo can I receive from a messenger? Hashem has abandoned us. Hashem responds that it is not possible for Hashem to abandon us as a mother cannot forget a child, even if they have forgotten Me. Still, the next week, we read that Klal Yisroel refuses nechomo because there is still a messenger being used. In this week's haftarah, Hashem responds that He personally is bringing nechomo. "Anochi, Anochi menachemchem."

The Meaning of Nechomo

What is the essence of nechomo? The word means change. Nechomo means there is a change of direction, a change of attitude and relationship. There is a keshar between us and Hashem but it can function in two modes. Either we initiate the interaction, or Hashem initiates it.

Elul coincides with this haftarah of Anochi anochi menachemchem. At this time of year, Hashem makes Himself more available to us. He initiates the relationship. Elul is roshei teivos of "Ani ledodi vedodi li." Hashem extends Himself to us and creates a situation that makes it easier to come closer to Him. Hashem tells us we've forgotten that Hashem has created everything—the entire cosmos and every individual human being.

Despite the fact that there is such vastness and immensity in the universe, Hashem is still concerned with each and every individual. Only Hashem has this capacity. We have forgotten this dual dimension of Hashem's interaction with this world. Who are we afraid of? Not Hashem, but various people who we perceive as being a threat to our well-being. We have forgotten that there is a reality called hashgocho profis. The first step to achieving nechomo is to realize that Hashem has not abandoned us to chance and to coincidence. Other human beings do not have power over our destiny.

There is a man in the White House called Donald Trump and a dictator of North Korea called Kim Jong Un. Both leaders think they are in charge of the fate of the world and they are deciding if there will be nuclear war or not. But we know that they are just tools in Hashem's hands. They can plan and strategize all they like, but Hashem runs the world. Once we wake up to this reality and realize that our pursuers are just illusions, then we get a whole different perspective over our lives.

Hashem decides if we are going to achieve our material goals or we will fail. We aren't in control. We hire watchmen to guard the city, we try our best to do a proper hishtadlus, but we know

that our success is in Hashem's hands alone.

Once we gain this perspective, our whole relationship with Hashem is transformed.

Origins of Avodo Zoro

People tend to think that avodo zoro was a primitive system of superstitious beliefs. The truth is very different. It was a very sophisticated system of trying to manipulate the spiritual forces that Hashem uses as tools to control the various forces of nature that keep the world functioning. There are two ways one can control those forces. One way is to realize that these spiritual forces are nothing more than tools that Hashem uses, and you turn to Hashem directly to ask for what you want. Because everything that happens in this world happens by Hashem using those forces to achieve His ends.

But people thought they could influence those forces directly and avoid dealing with Hashem directly. This is very convenient because by avoiding Hashem you let yourself believe that aren't constrained by things like morality and self-discipline. You do what you want to get what you want.

Nowadays people still believe they can control the world by manipulating the power of science and medicine, and political power and monetary influence. But the truth is very different. Nothing succeeds without Hashem allowing it to happen. This is what the novi says: Klal Yisroel has to wake up to this reality.

Hashem says He is making Himself more available to us. He is initiating the relationship. He is here for us and this brings nechomo. But we only bring Moshiach by responding with a realization that Hashem is the source of all power and meaning.

The Summary of World History

The Midrash analyzes the sequence of creation. Bereishis boro Elokim es hashomayim v'es ho'oretz. That is the totality of the creation process. But then Hashem gives us a summary of the various stages of human history in the next two pesukim. There will be periods of Tohu, and periods of Bohu and Choshech, and Tehom. These are the different goluyos that Klal Yisroel will be subjugated by up until today. And then there is suddenly a Ruach Elokim merachefes al pnei hamoyim. Chazal say it is the ruach of Moshiach. What brings moshiach? The mayim—ayn mayim eloh Torah. Then there is yehi ohr – let there be light – and that is Moshiach himself.

Chazal tell us a very important thing.

At the end of days when it seems that the golus will go on indefinitely, Hashem is going to arrange a nechomo, a shift, and a reversal of the golus. He has brought about a tremendous revival of learning of Torah in our lifetime. This tremendous inspiration enables us to connect to Hashem on the deepest levels.

Every day in our davening we are mekabbel ol malchus shomayim in Krias Shema. But there are two brochos before Krias Shema. The first brocho talks about Hashem as the Creator of the world. The second brocho is a tefillah for Hashem to teach us and give us wisdom to enable us to learn and fulfill the Torah. But it is not just absorbing information. Our learning of Torah has to bring us to a higher level of living a life of Torah. This is "divrei Talmud Torah".

We talk about limud haTorah in Ma'ariv as well. When we go to sleep and wake up, our conversation is Torah and it will be a joy and an inspiration in our lives.

Before we are mekabbel ol malchus shomayim, we recognize that Torah is our life and our constant preoccupation. Because of this, Hashem's love will never depart from us. We establish our connection with Hashem through limud haTorah. This is how we bring Moshiach.

A Wealth of Prosperity

We live in a very interesting period of history when Klal Yisroel has been given the opportunity to learn Torah on a scale not seen for centuries and it is so accessible to everyone on every level. It is a precondition to the geuloh and we have to take that opportunity to the end. It is up to us and our devotion to limud haTorah to take advantage of the opportunity to connect to Hashem. The availability of material wealth in our community and the availability of limud haTorah obligates everyone to maximize the ideal situation that has been given to us on a silver platter.

The Midrash at the end of Parshas Bereishis contrasts the different economic conditions of humanity before Noach was born and after. Noach was given his name because his birth ushered a nechomo and a relief from economic hardship. After Odom was thrown out of Gan Eden, the earth was given a curse and became less productive. After each subsequent descent of humanity, the earth was cursed more and more and it became harder and harder to survive off the land's produce. Hashem told them to do teshuvoh to reverse the trend. But they did not respond. Before Hashem gave up entirely, He decided to bring an overwhelming brocho to see if maybe they would do teshuvoh because of all the hardships they were enduring. If life would be easier, maybe they would turn around. So with Noach's birth, Hashem brought incredible prosperity to the world. But what happened instead? People engaged in an insane pursuit of pleasure and evil. They were preoccupied with evil plans and designs the entire day.

So Hashem changed his mind and sent the mabbul. He had to start all over again with Noach and his family.

Hashem has given us a level of luxury and comfort that the world has never seen before. But people just take it for granted and use it to pursue more luxury and more pleasure-exactly the opposite of what was intended. Hashem has given us such easy conditions to learn Torah. He expects us to use it to get close to Him.

Incredible Opportunity

At different periods of Jewish history, there have been explosions of the development of Torah. After the destruction of the Bais Hamikdosh the spirit of the Jewish people was shattered. Rabbi Yochanon Ben Zakai said we will rebuild through Torah. Sixty years later there was a complete revival through limud haTorah with 12,000 pairs of talmidim sitting and learning at the feet of Rabbi Akiva. But they all died in a very short period of time. Why? Because they didn't let the Torah change them and transform them into what they should have

become, and Hashem wasn't interested in their Torah. The world became desolate from the vacuum. Rabbi Akiva went and rebuilt limud haTorah with five talmidim.

Hashem gives us opportunities, but it is incumbent upon us to take them and maximize them. Hashem doesn't give us guarantees. We live in a world after an unbelievable churbon of the Yiddishkeit of Europe. Seventy years later, Klal Yisroel is flourishing. But Hashem expects us to take the chance we've been given and not waste it.

We are in yeshiva for a new year. It is an unbelievable zechus to learn Torah and we have to take it seriously and not squander it. Hashem says through the novi that He created the world and He is in charge. We have no-one to fear. Sometimes it is difficult, but we only grow when we want to grow. We have to commit ourselves and re-inforce ourselves in our growth process. We begin the process in Elul when Hashem makes Himself more accessible to us. And, im yirtzeh Hashem, we will take full advantage of that closeness to make sure that the growth actually happens, and we will look back at a year of unbelievable development in our yedias haTorah, yiras shomayim, middos tovos and dikduk bemitzvos.