

In last week's parsha, Hashem predicts that when the disasters and tragedies happen to individuals or to the community, the response will be to say that Hashem has abandoned us. This will be the pattern of Jewish history. It is incumbent upon us to realize that calamities befall us only because Hashem removes Himself from the scene and hides behind a screen of natural causation. And at times, it seems that His Hashgochoh is completely removed and we are totally abandoned to blind fate.

The posuk uses the double phrase of "hastir astir". The Baal Shem Tov was known to explain that any time there is tragedy in the world, it is one level of hester ponim. But you can still sense that Hashem is pulling the strings and making things happen behind the scenes to make things turn out alright in the end. Then there is another level of hester ponim where the outlook is so bleak and so despairing that you can't even detect any trace of hidden hashgochoh. There is no way you can imagine how this will turn out for the good.

All rishonim ask the question: why is the double hester happening after the Jews are doing teshuvoh and are starting to reflect on the cause of the tragedies? The Meshech Chochmoh answers that one's reaction to calamity can go in one of two directions. It can be taken as a sign of true abandonment and you then just give up, or one can take it as a message of Divine punishment—a wake-up call to improve and bring Hashem back into our lives. If you think Hashem just abandons us and forgets about us, you haven't absorbed the lesson of the Chumash. Through His administering of reward and punishment, Hashem will ensure that the Torah will never be forgotten from Klal Yisroel. He never abandons us completely.

There are two witnesses that will guarantee that this message is never lost: the Torah itself—from last week's parsha—and the heaven and earth—in this week's parsha.

Parshas Haazinu starts with the idea that when I call out Hashem's Name, we attribute higher level of greatness to Elokeinu. We learn a number of halachos from this posuk. One is the answering of the zimun by others when bentching with more people. Another is the bracha of birkas haTorah. Apparently, when we learn Torah, it is like uttering the Shem Hashem and requires attributing extra greatness through a bracha. But why is learning Torah like uttering the Name of Hashem? The Ramban in his introduction to his commentary on Chumash says that the letters of the Torah can be structured to form different words and sentences. One of those variations is making the pesukim of the Torah into the Shem Hashem.

Hashem as He is within Himself is unknowable to us and to any created being. The Creator is inherently unfathomable by the created. We only can relate to Hashem by virtue of Hashem's actions which define His middos—His modes of interactions with the world. He created the world, He sustains the world in an ongoing manner, He orchestrates human events and guides human history. The greatest manifestation of the wisdom of Hashem in all of creation is the words of the Torah. So when we speak divrei Torah, we are invoking the highest level of Hashem's middah through which He interacts with us. This is what a Name of Hashem essentially is. So we need to make a bracha before uttering words of Torah.

If you want to understand the message of Haazinu in particular, you have to increase the praise of the Name of Hashem.

Hashem is a tzur—tzayir. He shaped and formed the world. He is a

rock—He stabilizes the world. The world is in perfect balance and equilibrium. The entire world is governed by both physical law and moral law put into place by Hashem with incredible precision and exactitude.

All His ways are just and righteous. He is faithful. He fulfills His promises of reward for mitzvos and punishment for aveiros. Hashem does not perform evil or injustice. If there is evil and injustice in this world, it is due to man's corruption of the world. We have been given free will and with it, tremendous responsibility over the state of the world. What we do has real consequences. Very few people can excuse themselves by claiming they aren't able to control themselves and their impulses. Hashem only removed the free will of a handful of the most evil persons who have ever lived.

We can make of ourselves into anything we put our minds to.

There is a very peculiar concept that dominates western psychology. It is the notion that people are born with a core, unchangeable personality that is initially hidden. One has to go through a process of "self-discovery" to bring out that hidden self, and only then can he live an authentic life that is true to his "real self". The Torah doesn't have such a concept. You can make yourself whatever you want to be. Yes, we all have a unique combination of inborn traits with various strengths and weaknesses. But our job in life isn't just to accept them as they are and cater to them. The Torah tells us which tendencies should be encouraged and developed and which ones need to be suppressed and redirected.

Hashem never performs any injustice. All the evil in the world comes from our bad choices and the judgment that those choices release into the world in response.

The parsha then turns to address Klal Yisroel directly: Reflect what Hashem has given you—how He designed and fashioned the human being. Don't be ignorant and pretend you came into being and became a nation at random. There is an amazing Sifri on this posuk. It explains how Hashem put deep wisdom into every limb and organ of the human body for a person's benefit. Doctors have enormous hubris in thinking there are parts of the body which are superfluous and vestiges of primitive stages of life which can be removed at whim. It inevitably leads to disastrous consequences.

We cannot be ignorant of history either. The Chumash teaches us everything we need to know about who we are and what we are supposed to be doing on this planet.

There are a fixed number of nations corresponding to the seventy individuals who came to Egypt and formed Klal Yisroel. Chazal tell us that when Hashem was setting up the world, there was a discussion in Heaven between Hashem and seventy angels. They were distributing the seventy nations to the various angels to be in charge of them. No-one opted to take Klal Yisroel so Hashem Himself took us as His own.

What are Chazal trying to convey with this midrash?

Every nation has a certain national character and is governed by various metaphysical rules. Each angel has a designated nation under its influence who shapes its culture and national identity. This spiritual force is what runs their history. But we have a Jewish national character and culture—it comes directly from Hashem based on the Torah He gave us. What is Jewish culture? To be certain, it isn't what the artists and musicians in Tel Aviv are producing. It is a kind of lifestyle that

emerges from living the ideals of Torah Shebichsav and Torah Shebaal peh.

All the other nations of the world get their direction from various spiritual forces. We are fundamentally different. Hashem interfered in human history and took personal care of us. But our tendency unfortunately is that when things are going very good for us, we start to think we did it all ourselves and don't owe anything back to Hashem. We start to believe in Jewish genius and Jewish ingenuity. The relationship we have with Hashem has an upside and a downside. The upside is that Hashem can make our lives as wonderful as you can imagine. The downside is that when we neglect our side of the bargain, we can lose everything.

In the end of days, we will come to the final realization of where it all comes from and what stands behind all of reality. It is only Hashem.

Last week's parsha concluded with Klal Yisroel's feelings of abandonment and hopelessness, and Hashem's response of even greater hester ponim which makes us realize Hashem is still there but He is punishing us for abandoning His Torah. Then we do teshuvoh and come back to Eretz Yisroel. In this week's parsha, we see the end of history where Hashem finally reveals Himself to show how He is the only reality. In the end of history, Hashem will judge all the nations for their role in perpetrating evil. Klal Yisroel is different. The reward and punishment don't wait for the end of history. It is immediate.

Klal Yisroel's Yom Hadin is unique. Although Hashem gives judgment to all the nations every Rosh Hashono, the center of that judgement is Klal Yisroel. We have to understand we are the center of the universe. The whole justification for the very existence of the universe is Klal Yisroel's keeping the Torah. All the major world events between the world powers—today and always—were only centered around Klal Yisroel.

Our own avodah on an individual and national basis has to always be centered around living a life of Torah and mitzvos. People think that now with Jewish sovereignty over Eretz Yisroel, we can settle into a more normal, conventional, national identity that is typical of most nations of the world. It is a terrible mistake.

We have to understand that certain times in history are set up for radical changes. If we are on the right level we can bring about the geuloh. If we are on the wrong level we will experience churbon. Surveying the past 100 years, notice how the years of shemittah and motzai shemittah were either years of tremendous prosperity and opportunity or the opposite. 1917 was shemittah and the United States entered the war and it was the year of the Balfour Declaration—a tremendous

opportunity. But what was done with it? They can be used and they can be abused. The war ended motzai shemittah.

1924 was one of the biggest disasters for Klal Yisroel because the U.S. immigration policy was to close the borders to Europe's refugees. This, more than anything else, condemned the Jews of Europe to Hitler's program of extermination.

These were the key years for the beginning and end of the Second World War. The Six Day War, Yom Kippur War and Lebanese War all took place either in shemittah or motzai shemittah. These years of shemittah and motzai shemittah are opportunities, and like everything in life, it all depends what we do with it.

We have a gift of Eretz Yisroel today. And we have used this gift to maximize limud haTorah to an unprecedented degree. But at the same time, there is tremendous animosity towards Torah Jews and Torah learning in this country. The future is by no means secure. It can go either way depending on our choices and our avodah.

Hashem gave us a body and it has all the faculties we need to fulfill our purpose in this world. Hashem gave us a precious neshomo which is pure and longs for ruchniyus. But what do we do with it? Do we corrupt it and stifle it? Or do we let it grow and flourish?

Haazinu is a parsha which describes all the tremendous historical opportunities Hashem gave to us, and we blew it. This is on a national level. We have to look at ourselves today and realize what unique opportunities have been given to us and make sure not squander them. We can't afford to allow ourselves to be preoccupied with trivialities and childish foolishness.

Don't ever lose perspective. Our generation is the most prosperous and comfortable in all human history—with people making astronomical amounts of money with very little effort. No-one could have imagined this kind of wide-spread prosperity and luxurious living on this scale 100 years ago.

But what are we doing with all this wealth and opportunity? What are we doing during our years in Eretz Yisroel—in yeshiva—when we have no other responsibilities other than to learn Torah and increase yiras shomayim?

Our cheshbon hanefesh has to be: how do we maximize our opportunities? Our introspection on Yom Kippur has to be trying to be honest with ourselves and ask ourselves if we are doing our utmost to use all the opportunities we have been given to grow in Torah and yiras shomayim.