

PARSHAS VAYELECH

תשפ"ו

Parshas Vayelech is always read around Rosh Hashono time – it is Moshe Rabbeinu's final statement to Klal Yisroel. He is appointing Yehoshua to take over the leadership. There will be a mitzvah of Hakhel – once every seven years the king will read Mishneh Torah to the people.

Hashem warns Moshe that after he dies and Klal Yisroel settle in Eretz Yisroel, they will forget the things Moshe taught them and they will start worshipping avodo zoro. People think the many warnings against worshipping idols we find in the Torah are no longer relevant in modern times. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Avodo zoro is the belief that there are other forces independent of Hashem and that you deal with these forces to get what you want in life. The powerful forces of nature and spiritual forces through which Hashem runs the world are worshipped instead of Hashem, who is controlling them. "Hashem echod" means that Hashem is the only cause of everything that happens in this world.

When people get sick, they go to a doctor to get healed. But one can approach the role of a doctor in two very different ways: You can reduce everything to a specific physical cause – like getting a bacterial infection, and you take an anti-biotic to kill the bacteria. Or you can see the system of natural causation as a tool in Hashem's hands to arrange a specific outcome. Hashem arranged for you specifically to catch that bacteria which made you sick, and He will determine if the anti-biotic you take for it will actually succeed in killing it.

Hashem is the only cause, but you are supposed to act within the rules of teva – knowing at the same time that Hashem is giving you the sickness and the cure.

Avodo zoro is the belief that forces exist that work independently of Hashem. Those forces could be Baal or Peor, or they can be the belief in the power of science or money to make things happen in the world independent of Hashem. It is all the same nisoyon that people have with bitochon. Although the world is set up with a system of causation, we still have to know with absolute certainty that Hashem is running everything.

But Hashem tells Moshe that sometime in the future, Klal Yisroel will stray after these forces and abandon Hashem, and in response, He will retract His presence from them. This will remove the protection that Klal Yisroel needs to survive. Why does this happen?

The truth is that from a natural standpoint, Klal Yisroel should not exist. In every generation, starting from Amolek, nations have risen up to destroy us – as we say every year in the haggodo. It is because Klal Yisroel as the chosen nation of Hashem poses a threat to their entire belief system. Iran and their radical form of Islam believe their messiah cannot bring the final redemption until every last Jew is eliminated. It doesn't matter where that Jew lives. Their religion dictates that they must get rid of every Jew on the planet.

Somehow, for 3,500 years, we have survived only because of Hashem's protection. When He pulls back, the natural forces of history resume their course and work aggressively to eliminate us. Hopefully, Klal Yisroel will wake up and bring Hashem's protection back before it's too late.

In the contemporary mindset, one of the worst sins you can commit in the modern world is to blame any disaster on a spiritual failing – to see tragedies as a message from Hashem to wake us up to do teshuvoh.

But the Rambam says in Hilchos Taanis that when we refuse to look for a spiritual failing as the cause, and blame it on natural causes, we are being cruel. We are inviting more disasters to follow.

We see Hashem pulling back today, when for two years the surge of blind, irrational anti-Semitism has mushroomed all over the world almost overnight. People say they hate us the most, and when asked, they can't even explain why they hate us! Hashem is hoping we wake up and realize that all these things are happening because we need to do teshuvoh.

We are living at the end of history, and these parshiyos are predicting that Klal Yisroel will wake up and ask why are these things happening. But then Hashem pulls back even more! "הסתתר אסתיר פני מהם." There are two explanations as to what this means. The Ramban says there will be an initial cheshbon hanefesh, but it is half-hearted and incomplete. Hashem needs to hide Himself even more and then the real teshuvoh will begin and the geuloh will start. Until Klal Yisroel fully recognize where the problem is, Hashem will still be hiding.

The other explanation is worse. People will wake up and realize something is wrong in their lives, but they don't translate the hisorerus into anything concrete. They go back to sleep without taking any action. Then Hashem abandons them in a more extreme fashion.

There are two levels of hester ponim. One level is that times are hard, but you still can make out Hashem's pulling the strings behind the curtain. The other level is that things get so bad that you can't discern Hashem being there altogether. It feels like a total abandonment.

The solution is to write Shiras Ha'azinu. In this shiroh, the Torah tells us why things go wrong and why the tragedies are so horrible.

We are given a guarantee that the Torah will never be forgotten. Eventually, people will take Torah seriously. The Torah is always around, but at times, the number of people engaged in serious limud Torah were frighteningly few. But there will always be revivals and renewals in Jewish history – and it is through limud Torah.

On the one hand we live in very difficult times. Klal Yisroel is hated throughout the world to a level we haven't seen since Nazi Germany in the 1930's. There is a scandal in Germany today with shops hanging signs saying Jews are not allowed in.

The answer is to look internally and see what is wrong with our avodas Hashem. We don't try to pass the blame on others. How seriously do we take Torah and the fact that Hashem is running the world? We can't afford to take things lightly.

While we are in yeshiva, we need to take our learning and davening seriously. We are connecting our minds to the mind of Hashem all day long! If we would allow the Torah to uplift us and transform us into a superior people, the world will see this and impact them to an unbelievable degree. We have to appreciate the golden opportunity we are given.

I once had to attend a very difficult nichum aveilim. A father of a family just collapsed and died on Erev Pesach. The family asked me a difficult question – how can we have a simchas Yom Tov and a Pesach Seder with our father gone and our lives were turned upside down?

I told them to stop and focus on what Pesach is. The theme of Pesach is Hashem choosing us to be His special nation and connecting with Him and giving us a path for getting eternal reward. When you think

about the overwhelming special connection we have with the King of the Universe and how we are His representatives, you can drown out the sorrow.

So yes, we are hated and despised. We are accused of genocide, etc. But we have a job to do. We have to take our davening and our learning very seriously. Hashem listens to tefilloh more intently in a Beis Midrash, and even more intently in the place where you learn during the day.

Why do we blow shofar from the bimoh? Because we combine it with the zechus of krias haTorah. The most powerful tefilloh is when it is combined with the power of limud Torah. If you care about your tefillos being heard by Hashem, you will care where you daven, and make sure you daven in the place that maximizes the koach of your tefillos. That is one way to show that you take davening seriously.

As we have been saying for the past two weeks, when it comes to the end of days, when everything else fails, the thing that will turn things around and bring the final geuloh is limud haTorah. Getting pshat in Tosfos is how we bring Moshiach.

The posuk in the beginning of Bereishis describes "תוהו ובוהו וחשך" על פני תהום ורוח אלוקים מרחפת על פני המים ויהי אור. The midrash says this is an allusion to the entire process of human history. Each phrase is a different golus and shibbud malchus. 'Tehom' is Edom, which seems to go on and on without end. But then Christianity will begin to crumble. This is what we are seeing today – secularism has taken over the Western world. Eisov is coming down and the ruach of Moshiach is blowing over the water – the water of Torah. And then there is the final geuloh which follows.

Torah will never be forgotten, and that will be the springboard for the geuloh – may we be zocheh for it to come this year.