



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Nitzavim: Take it to Heart

Here we are. Rosh Hashana – Yom HaDin, the Judgment Day - is in a few days. And fortuitously, our parsha discusses our national *teshuva*. The first step in our national return and rehabilitation is a process of contemplation, of reflection and self-evaluation:

When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—and you **take them to heart** amidst the various nations to which the Lord your God has banished you, you will return to the Lord your God ... and heed His command with all your heart and soul (30:1-2).

What is this “taking to heart” that stimulates the *teshuva* process? What is it that we are taking to heart? Rabbi Hirsch explains:

Only after all that has been said in this Book of the Law thousands of years beforehand concerning the state of blessing and curse which will form your future, will have actually occurred, will you then bring back to your mind the sum of the thousands of years of experience of your external fate and deliberate on it, and the result will be that you will come back with your whole heart and soul to your God and His Torah.

It is the contemplation of the predictions of the Torah, and how Jewish history has aligned with them that will prompt the nation to change course. The peculiar highs and lows of the Jewish condition throughout history – the “curse” - the persecutions of history, and the “blessing” – the possibilities of national flourishing - that will lead the nation to reconsider its future and to return to God and Torah.

The corollary at the individual level would be this: reflection about the mistakes we have made and their negative effects and consequences, along with the “blessing” – the prospect of how things could be better, have the capacity to trigger personal transformation and change.

Without introspection and self-evaluation it is difficult to envisage repair and renewal.

Whereas our parsha suggests that it is the contemplation of the highs and lows of our national condition that will trigger the process of national introspection, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook has a different approach. For him, the return to God is stimulated not by taking **Jewish history** to heart, but rather by listening to our **inner voice**:

When we forget the nature of our authentic soul, when we fail to look into the inner life of our self, everything gets confused and full of doubt. The prime teshuvah which immediately illuminates the darkness is that a person returns to himself, to the root of his soul, and he will at once return to God – the soul of all souls. He will continue to step forwards in the higher levels of holiness and purity. This is true for the individual, the nation, all humanity, and for the entire universe. (Orot HaTeshuvah 15:10).

For Rav Kook, sin is estrangement; divergence from our true essence, our essential purpose. *Teshuva* – return; sometimes translated as repentance, but for Rav Kook, more accurately translated as “return” – is a return to the origin. We have lost ourselves, muddled our goals and priorities. We need to recalibrate; to reboot. As a nation, this means a return to unity, sovereignty, homeland, and vibrant national living, as well as a resurgence of our spiritual legacy. As individuals, this implies a return to ourselves as a prerequisite and as a means of returning to God.

Please discuss:

- What might be a factor that would bring a nation to do *teshuva*?
- What stimulus could bring an individual – you for example(!)- to change his or her life?
- Are there ways other than tragedy and crisis that could provoke change?
- Which of the ideas resonate more with you, Rav Hirsch or Rav Kook? Why?
- Some will say that we have signals within us which alert us when we are failing: We feel shame when we fall short, we feel happy when we are altruistic, we are embarrassed when we act wrongly. Sometimes, even eating badly makes us feel uncomfortable. Do you think that Rav Kook is correct that returning to self is a way to return to God, or would you say that our inner inclinations are more negative than that – that we have much within ourselves that requires restraint and control?

Wishing our readers a Shabbat Shalom and a Shana Tova!