



The Quantification of a Person As Revealed By His **YEARNING**

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Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Nitzavim-Vayeilech



The Quantification of a Person As Revealed By His **YEARNING**

Growth Through Suffering

The *Torah* juxtaposes the Portion of *Nitzavim* which begins, “You are standing today, before *Hashem*, your G-d...” to the previous portion of the curses (*tochacha*). What is the significance of this juxtaposition?

Rashi citing the *Midrash*: When the Jewish people had heard the 98 curses that would come upon them if they should violate the *Torah*, they were taken aback. In response, *Moshe* said to them that it is only through these curses that the Jewish people are able to maintain their clarity and remain on the path of *Torah*.

Midrash: “Why is it that when tragedy befalls the nations of the world, they are ultimately destroyed? However the Jewish people are able to survive the many tragedies that have come upon them? It is because when difficulties comes upon the nations, they bolt and rebel against G-d. They do not mention His Name. As it states, ‘Your Wrath should pour out upon the nations who do not know You. They did no call upon Your Name.’

However, in contrast, when tragedy befalls the Jewish people they become humbled/subordinate themselves and pray.” Because of the humility of the Jewish people in the face of tragedy, they are able to recognize their shortcomings/spiritual failings and supplicate G-d for forgiveness. In contrast, the nations of the world react to tragedy with defiance and rebelliousness against G-d, rather than understanding their culpability. This is why they are ultimately destroyed.

Gemara in Tractate *Yevamos*: There are characteristics that are unique to the Jewish people because they descend from *Avraham*, our Holy Patriarch. The Jew possesses the characteristics of Compassion/mercy, shame/conscience, and the propensity to do acts of kindness/*gemilas chasadim*. It is because of their spiritual pedigree, that the Jewish people have the capacity to sense the wrong in their behavior. It is because of this conscience that the Jew becomes humble, introspects, and repents as a result of

tragedy. On the other hand, if one is arrogant and self-absorbed, because of his conflicts of interest, he believes he is justified in his actions. *Avraham* was able to recognize G-d because he possessed a unique level of “shame/conscience.”

Torah: *Avraham* compared himself to “dust and ash.” Meaning, his level of humility was such that he had negated his self-interest, thus allowing him to have a unique level of objectivity. Because of his level of humility, he had the clarity to recognize G-d as the Creator creation saying, “Who is the Master of this magnificent citadel (creation)?” He was the only one from beginning of existence to recognize and appreciate that there must be an Omnipotent Being Who wills all existence. If one’s sense of self value is that the world exists only to accommodate his needs, then he will be conflicted and not recognize that he is subject to G-d’s Will Who is the Creator.

Torah: When *Moshe* addressed the Jewish people he said, “...you are the minority (*m’aat*).”

Rashi citing *Chazal*: “*M’aat* (small)” means that when G-d extols the Jewish people they are humbled. Despite the fact that the Jew may be worthy to reap the glory that is bestowed upon him by G-d, he subordinates and negates himself before Him. It is because of this innate humility, that the Jew is able to repent in the face of difficulty and adversity.

The Jewish Profile

Torah: “For this commandment that I command you today– it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, (for you) to say, ‘Who can ascend to heaven for us...it is in your mouth and your heart to perform it.’ There is an argument among the commentators as to which *mitzvah* this verse is referring. One opinion is that “this commandment that I command you today” is referring to the *mitzvah* of repentance (*teshuvah*). The other opinion is that the verse is referring to the study of *Torah*. Every Jew has relevance to doing *teshuvah* as well as the study of *Torah*.

Baal HaTurim: “In the verse, ‘Who can ascend to heaven (mi yaale lanu ha’shameima)’ the first letter of each word, if read together, spell ‘*milah*’ (circumcision). The letters that conclude each word, if read together, spell ‘*YKVK* (*Hashem* – G-d the Omnipotent Being)’. This is

to teach us that a Jew cannot ascend to heaven to be in the proximity of G-d without being circumcised.” It is interesting to note that circumcision has relevance both to *teshuvah* and to *Torah*. Thus, the explanation of *Baal HaTurim* applies to both opinions regarding to which *mitzvah* the verse is referring.

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh: The initial intent of Creation was that physical/terrestrial level of existence should be the location of G-d’s Presence. However, because of the sin of *Adam*, the world became spiritually putrefied, causing G-d to ascend from the physical level.

Zohar: *Adam* was created without a foreskin. It was only after he had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge (of Good and Evil) that he developed a foreskin. The foreskin is an expression of the impurity that was infused into man. The *mitzvah* of circumcision is intended to reinstate the individual to a similar level of *Adam* before the sin. After the receiving of the *Torah*, G-d commanded the Jewish people to build a *Mishkan* (Sanctuary) so that He should dwell amongst them. The *Mishkan* was the location, on the terrestrial level, that reflected the intent of creation before the sin of *Adam*.

Torah regarding the service of *Yom Kippur*: “With this *Aaron* shall enter into the Holy...”

Jerusalem Talmud: “With this” means “with circumcision.” *Aaron*, as the High Priest, was only able to enter into the “Holy” because he was circumcised. It was only because *Aaron* was reinstated to a state which had relevance to the pre-sin level of *Adam* was he able to enter into the location that reflects the intent of Creation which preceded the sin.

Jeremiah the Prophet: “If not for My Covenant (*Bris*) being in affect day and night, the extent of heaven and earth would not exist.” There is an argument in Tractate *Nidarim* whether “My Covenant (*Bris*)” is referring to circumcision (*Bris milah*) or the study of *Torah*.

R’ Akiva Eiger: The opinion that states that “*Bris*” is referring to *Torah* concurs that “*Bris*” also is referring to circumcision. In order for one to have relevance to *Torah*, he must be circumcised.

Zohar: “The Jewish people, the *Torah*, and G-d are all one.” Meaning, the only way the Jew can cleave to G-d is through the study of *Torah*. Being circumcised is a prerequisite to engaging in *Torah* and meriting the Divine Assistance to comprehend G-d’s Wisdom.

Midrash: The *Torah* had preceded existence by more than 900 generations. In addition, the *Torah* was the blueprint for creation. As it is stated, "He gazed into the *Torah* and created the world." One can only have relevance to *Torah* if he reflects the state of man which was pre sin. Thus, the Jew can only cleave to G-d through the study of *Torah* if he is in a circumcised state. With this we can have an appreciation for *Baal HaTurim* who explains based on the opening and closing words in the verse, "Who can ascend to heaven (*mi yaale lanu ha'shameima*)..." – that the only way a Jew can have relevance to G-d is by being circumcised.

The Key To the Jewish Soul

There is a positive commandment (*Hakheil*) that in the eighth year after the seven-year Sabbatical cycle, the king of Israel must read the Book of *Devarim* to the entire Jewish people gathered on the Temple Mount.

Torah regarding this *mitzvah*: "At the end of seven years...when all Israel comes to appear before *Hashem*...you shall read this *Torah* before all Israel, in their ears. Gather together the people – the men, the women, and the small children...they shall hear and they shall learn to fear/revere *Hashem*..." The *Torah* is communicating to us that the purpose of the Jewish people gathering to hear the reading of the *Torah* is so that they should study it and learn to fear/revere G-d.

Ohr HaChaim: Although a woman is not obligated in the *mitzvah* of *Torah* study, she nevertheless must observe the *mitzvos* which have relevance to her life. Thus, she must hear and learn the *mitzvos* that pertain to her. In contrast, men are obligated in the study of *Torah* independent of it being the prerequisite for the performance of *mitzvos*. As a result of studying *Torah*, the Jewish people will learn to fear/revere G-d and come to observe all the *mitzvos* properly.

The only way one can come to revere G-d is through the study of *Torah*. The *Torah* itself has the innate ability to touch upon the spirituality of the Jew to cause him to have a sense of G-d. Thus, in addition to understanding one's obligation, the study of *Torah* sensitizes the Jew to spirituality. Without being impacted by the study of *Torah*, the spirituality of the Jew remains dormant.

Midrash Eicha: "G-d said, "Better that you (the Jewish people) would have abandoned Me (for idolatry) and kept the *Torah* because its illumination would have

brought you back to good (proper path)." If one engages in *Torah* study (with a sincere commitment) the innate holiness of the *Torah*, will have a profound illuminating effect upon him. It will activate his spirituality. Just as when one bathes himself, regardless of intent, he will be cleansed (because he is fully immersed). Identically if one immerses himself in *Torah* study, one will develop a spiritual sensitivity that will cause him to become enlightened. He will then fear/revere G-d.

Rabbeinu Yonah in *The Gates of Repentance*: The prerequisite for repentance (*teshuvah*) is the recognition and appreciation of one's sins. If one does not understand the nature and gravity of his transgressions, he will not repent. What is the process that one must undertake in order to appreciate his shortcomings and cause him to repent?

Blessing for repentance in the *Amidah* (Silent Prayer): "Bring us back our Father, to Your *Torah*, and bring us near, our King to Your service, and influence us to return in perfect repentance before You..." We see from this blessing that the process to do *teshuvah* is predicated first engaging in *Torah* study. He must then actualize that *Torah* study through the observance of *mitzvos*. It is only after studying *Torah* and performing *mitzvos* that one has relevance to returning in "perfect repentance before G-d."

It is only through the study of *Torah* that one can truly appreciate the wrong that he has done. Thus, the process of *teshuvah* is similar to that of *Hakheil* – that the Jewish people must hear the *Torah* in order to study it to come to fear G-d. If one does not experience G-d as a reality in his life, he will not have the capacity to repent. The study of *Torah* is the key to ignite the Jewish soul. As it is stated, "The *mitzvah* is the lamp and the *Torah* is the light."

The Expectation of Man

Torah: "I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you..."

Rashi citing *Chazal*: "G-d said to the Jewish people, "You should look at the heaven and the earth which I have created to serve you... Did it ever happen that the sun did not rise in the east and illuminate the world? The earth that I created to serve you – did it ever change its function? Did you ever plant and it did

not grow? Did you ever plant wheat and barley grew in its place? If the creations of heaven and earth do not deviate from their function despite the fact that they are not deserving of reward when they function as they were intended to or receive punishment if they should fail, should it not be more so that the Jewish people not deviate from their responsibility because they are deserving of reward and subject to punishment?"

One of the methodologies given at Sinai as an approach to interpret the *Torah* is known as *kal v'chomer*. This logical principle states, for example, if one is deserving of reward for doing less, how much more so is one deserving for doing more (minimally the same degree of reward). To give the Jewish people a greater understanding of their responsibility, *Moshe* uses heaven and earth as the model to establish the *kal v'chomer* to give them an appreciation of the value of their actions.

It seems that the function of heaven and earth is not comparable to the function of a human being. Heaven and earth are not "beings" that have the ability to choose. Therefore, they perform the function for which they were created. However, the human being who is a creature of choice continuously contends with an inclination which makes his choice difficult. If so, there is no basis for the *kal v'chomer*. Since the *Torah* communicates this as a valid *kal v'chomer* we must understand why it is the case.

Rambam in *Hilchos Yisodei HaTorah: Malachim* (angels) who were created to carry out the Will of G-d are not spiritual robots. An angel is a spiritual being who does not deviate from carrying out the Will of G-d because it recognizes and understands who G-d is. It has such a level of clarity that doing His Will is not a struggle. We find on the third day of Creation that G-d decreed, "Let the earth give forth fruit trees producing fruit." Meaning that not only should the fruit of the tree be edible, but even the tree itself should be edible.

However, G-d's Command only brought about a tree which was itself inedible but that produced edible fruits. For some unknown reason, the angel, who is the spiritual being, who carries out the agency of G-d, did not follow the order as it was given. Thus, the result was not as perfect as G-d had wanted it to be. Now that we understand that the function of the angel is based on its own understanding of G-d, we are now able to appreciate the *kal v'chomer* which is being drawn by

the *Torah* (from heaven and earth to the behavior of the human being). Although the angel is not deserving of reward or punishment it does not deviate from His Will because it is cognizant of the Will of G-d. The Jew who is subject to reward and punishment should definitely be cognizant of His Will because if not, he will be held culpable for its violation or deserving of reward for its fulfillment.

The only reason a Jew fails is because of his lack of clarity. The function of the evil inclination is to distract and overwhelm the Jew so he will not appreciate the Will of G-d. He will lose perspective regarding his behavior. If one would continuously reflect on the consequences of his actions – for the positive or negative – then he would be no different than the angel. In fact the Jew would be even more inclined than the angel to do the Will of G-d because he is eligible for reward while the angel is not.

Gemara in Tractate *Succah*: "I (G-d) created the evil inclination, and the *Torah* as its antidote." The *Torah* is needed to give one the clarity to appreciate the consequences of his actions. It is when one achieves clarity through *Torah* study that he is able to subdue the evil inclination.

Torah: At the end of time, G-d will circumcise our hearts and the hearts of our children.

Sforno: This can mean, "G-d will remove all confusion from our hearts. He will open our eyes and thus be removed from the pitfalls of life." One will have the clarity to want to do "good" because the state of confusion in which we exist will be lifted. In order not to have this happen, one only has to realize the invaluable benefit of doing the Will of G-d and the grave consequences that result from deviating and not following His Will.

Gemara in Tractate *Taanis*: A *Torah* Sage angers because the fire of *Torah* is within him. As the verse states, "Are not My Words like fire..."

Rashi: The *Torah* contained within the Sage causes him to become angry. The *Torah* itself gives one an appreciation and depth of understanding of the wrong that is being perpetrated. However others who are not advanced in their *Torah* knowledge do not have the capacity to sense the wrong in what is contrary to the *Torah*. It is only by gaining clarity that one can attain a

semblance of the understanding of an angel. Thus, the comparison that is drawn by the *Torah* between the Jew and the angel is valid.

The Expression of Service of G-d **(From Ki Savo)**

Torah: There is a positive commandment “You must serve G-d with all of your heart...”

Gemara in Tractate *Berachos*: “What is the meaning of ‘service (*avodah*) of the heart’? It is *tefillah* (prayer).” *Avodah* (service) also manifests itself through the bringing of sacrifices in the Temple.

Ramban: As a result of one’s transgression, one deserves to die. However, through the Mercy of G-d, the sinner is allowed to bring a sacrifice in his own stead. When the sinner sincerely repents and understands that in truth, G-d is accepting the sacrifice in the place of his own life, then he will merit atonement. This perspective is rooted in one’s understanding of G-d’s dominion over existence.

Ramban citing *Sifre* in *Re’eh*: “What is the *mitzvah* of ‘Him you shall serve...’? It is the study of *Torah* and the bringing of sacrifices.”

Ramban: One fulfills this positive commandment of serving G-d by studying *Torah* and reflecting upon it. One’s mind must be continuously occupied with the *Torah* that he had studied. The essence of the human being is his mind. If one’s mind is permeated with *Torah* thoughts then he has truly dedicated and consecrated himself to the service of G-d. We see from *Sifre* that the study of *Torah* regarding the *mitzvah* of “Him you shall serve...” has the equivalent value of bringing sacrifices. Just as an offering is an expression of one’s own dedication to the service of G-d, so too is the ongoing preoccupation with *Torah* study an expression of one’s selfless and total dedication to G-d.

From the beginning of the month of *Elul* through the festival of *Shemini Atzeres*, we recite the *Psalm*, “Of *David*, *Hashem* is my light/illumination...”

Midrash: From the beginning of the month of *Elul* through the festival of *Shemini Atzeres*, we recite the *Psalm*, “Of *David*, *Hashem* is my light/illumination...” The phrase “my light” is referring to *Rosh Hashanah*, the Day of Judgment. On *Rosh Hashanah* one stands before G-d in judgment and his spiritual record is carefully scrutinized. Even the angels in heaven tremble from the exactness of G-d’s judgment. One must therefore prepare for this monumental day. This is brought about through introspection, making amends, correcting one’s shortcomings, and committing oneself not to transgress again in the future. How does one create within himself a sensitivity to be able to recognize and appreciate his shortcomings? In order to do proper *teshuvah* (repentance) one must have a sense of the wrong of his failing. This sensitivity can only be brought about through qualitative *Torah* study.

King Solomon in *Proverbs*: “The *mitzvah* is the lamp and the *Torah* is the light.” As the *Midrash* explained that *Rosh Hashanah* is the light/illuminator so too is *Torah*. *Rosh Hashanah*, because its essence is based in exacting judgment, is a day which causes clarity. However, this is only at the moment that one stands in judgment. The study of *Torah*, on the other hand, brings about a continuous level of clarity whenever one engages in its pursuit.

It is because *Torah* study on an ongoing basis is considered “the service of G-d”, through which one merits a unique level of Divine Assistance that provides the individual with special illumination –thus giving one the ability to internalize his spirituality as a reality in his life. The *Gemara* in Tractate *Shabbos* states, “One who comes to purify himself, (G-d) will assist him.” In order for one to have the desire to purify himself and ultimately access the Divine Assistance that is needed, one needs to enter into the service of G-d. This process begins by dedicating oneself to *Torah* study.



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