

PARSHAS HAAZINU

תשפ"ז

The testimony of Shomayim and Aretz

Parshas Haazinu is generally read on Shabbos Shuvah. Only when there is a Shabbos between Yom Kippur and Sukkos do we read Parshas Vayeilech before Yom Kippur.

"הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶדְבְּרָה." There is a very strange Rashi here. For years I puzzled over it.

Why is Moshe Rabbeinu talking to Shomayim and Aretz? He should be talking to Klal Yisroel! Rashi explains that Moshe had made a bris with Klal Yisroel, and he needed witnesses who would remain. The people who are here today will be gone tomorrow. In five hundred years, in a thousand years, who is going to testify that there is a bris? Shomayim and Aretz will always be here.

But I don't understand. I go outside, pick up a clump of earth, and say, "Will you please tell me whether there is a bris?" What is the earth going to tell me? It isn't going to tell me anything! In what way are Shomayim and Aretz witnesses?

What it means is as follows: Klal Yisroel is a very unusual people. The history of Klal Yisroel makes zero sense. Klal Yisroel survives every churban, every destruction, and then rebuilds itself with strength. The history of the world is the proof that Hakodosh Boruch Hu is treating us in a very special way.

On the way back from the United States this summer, my plane stopped in Athens. I had eight and a half hours in the airport. A certain yeshiva bachur, who also had a long layover, came over to ask whether it was permitted to visit the Parthenon, the Acropolis. I sat there in Athens thinking about it. Twenty-four hundred years ago, Greece ruled the world. Greek culture ruled the world. Torah was Torah, and Klal Yisroel was Klal Yisroel, but Greece conquered Klal Yisroel and tried to impose its will on us.

If anyone then had asked, "Who has the future?" the answer would have been Athens. They had the culture. They had everything. Today, what is Greece? It's a country. Nothing special. And we're still here, doing great. Rome? The same story.

I grew up after the Second World War. Klal Yisroel was shattered to pieces. People began to realize the extent of the churban, what had happened in the concentration camps and everywhere else. Jewish Europe was finished and gone. At that time, the Pope, yimach shemo vezichro, an anti-Semite, announced, "Jews! Realize that now is the time, after you see what happened to you, after you have been decimated, to convert!"

A fundamental part of Christian theology was that the Jews were a persecuted people because they had rejected oso ho'ish, and that they would never be able to return to their land. But just three years later, the State of Israel came into existence. Their entire philosophy, which began in the year 323, was disproved virtually overnight.

How many people were interested in learning Torah after the war? The people who talked about rebuilding Torah were considered totally insane. In the middle of the Second World War, the Ponevezher Rav decided that he was going to build Ponevezh on top of that mountain in Bnei Brak. "You are crazy!" The few people who set out to build Torah in the United States heard the same thing. But Klal Yisroel bounced back. Eighty years later, Klal Yisroel is in a wonderful position.

Yes, there is a bris. Hakodosh Boruch Hu shows it to us if we want to open our eyes.

The opportunity of our generation

We are living in very interesting times. I'm sharing with you the thoughts I have as I approach Yom HaDin. There is an incredible Midrash that I review in my mind at least five or ten times a week. I repeat it, and repeat it, and repeat it:

"והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך על פני תהום ורוח אלקים מרחפת על פני המים"

The Midrash tells us that the world will go through four periods. The last will be Rome, Christianity, and it will seem to go on forever. Then, at the end of days, when Christianity begins to crumble, there will be a tremendous spread of limud haTorah in the world, preparing for Moshiach. That is what is happening in our lives. Unbelievable! I don't know whether there was ever a time in the history of Klal Yisroel when such dramatic events lined up to establish limud haTorah on the scale we have today.

That is what Chazal predicted from the pesukim: Rome/Christianity crumbles, and limud haTorah spreads. We have that zechus in our generation. We have the ability to learn Torah in a way that I don't know when in the history of Klal Yisroel was possible before. We have to appreciate the opportunity Hakodosh Boruch Hu has given us.

Torah has to change the person

The posuk says, יַעֲרוֹף כַּמֶּטֶר לִקְחֵי תֹזֶל כַּטֵּל אִמְרָתִי כַשְׁעִירִים עָלֵי דָשָׁא, "What is 'יערוף'?" Rashi explains:

"זו היא העדות שתעידו – נשאני אומר בפניכם תורה שננתתי לישראל שהיא חיים לעולם כמטר זה שהוא חיים לעולם; כאשר יערפו השמים טל ומטר."

Torah is like rain. It brings life to the world. Now, there is a very misunderstood statement by the Gra that people who oppose limud haTorah always misconstrue. What do tal and matar do? They make things grow. If I plant tomato seeds, tomatoes grow. If I plant cucumber seeds, cucumbers grow. Whatever is in the ground grows from the rain. And if there are weeds, the weeds grow too. Rain makes the bad things grow along with the good things.

But Torah is not working simply that way. Torah has incredible power, but a person has to learn it for the right reason. Torah is like water. But it is more than just water.

Hakodosh Boruch Hu is beyond this world. Our human minds cannot comprehend what He is, because we think in terms of this world, and He is beyond it. That creates a deep problem. How do we connect to Him when our minds are so limited by the terms of this world?

Hakodosh Boruch Hu gave us a gift called Torah. The Torah contains all the wisdom of Hakodosh Boruch Hu that this world is capable of containing. When my mind is occupied with Torah, and I am learning it because it is Hakodosh Boruch Hu's Torah, I can overcome the limitations of my human intellect and connect to Him through the Torah He gave us. Torah develops unbelievable powers to transcend the limits of this world, if I learn it for the right reason. "כל הלומד תורה לשמה זוכה לדברים הרבה."

Torah does not merely make whatever is there grow. If you learn Torah for the wrong reason, the Gemara says it destroys you. It is a 'sam hamaves' – it is poison. If you learn Torah for the right reason, it changes you, elevates you, and helps you go beyond your human limitations.

The Rambam says: Torah is like a mikveh. You immerse your mind in Torah. When is it going to change you? When you go in with the intention of having it change you. Then it gets rid of bad middos, bad dei'os, and wrong ideas. It perfects a human being.

It says in Pirkei Avos "כל הלומד תורה לשמה זוכה לדברים הרבה," and "ולא עוד אלא שמרוחמתי על כל המעשים" Torah makes you a superior individual. So why are you in yeshiva? A yeshiva is supposed to be a place where you come to connect your mind to Hakodosh Boruch Hu through Torah and become a superior human being.

Torah is supposed to change a person because he realizes that he is connecting to Hakodosh Boruch Hu through it. That is what Torah is all about.

Thanking Hashem for Torah

"כי שם ה' אקרא הבו גודל לאלוקינו" This is the source for birkas haTorah.

How do we begin the morning? With quite a few berochos. Asher yotzar: Thank You, Hakodosh Boruch Hu, that my body is functioning. אלוקי,

יא: "נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא: Thank You, Hakodosh Boruch Hu, for giving me a neshomo. And then: You gave me Torah. You gave me the ability to connect to You.

I thank Hakodosh Boruch Hu when I sit down to eat, for giving me food. Malbish arumim: I have clothes. Zokeif kefumim: I can stand up straight. For every gift He gives me, I thank Him. But birkas haTorah is a separate mitzvas aseh de'Oraisa according to the Ramban. Why?

When I realize that through Torah I can connect to Hakodosh Boruch Hu, "הבו גודל לאלוקינו." Thank Him for that opportunity. It is an entirely different level of gratitude from the gratitude I have for the other things in my life. At the beginning of the day, I have to thank Hakodosh Boruch Hu for this great gift: the ability to connect to Him through Torah.

The chochmah in the world and in Torah

Moving on in the parsha: "הצור תמים פעלו." What is tzur? Tzur means tzayar. He designed this world. There is the wisdom of Hakodosh Boruch Hu in the physical world, and there is His wisdom in the ideas of Torah.

When a person studies physics, chemistry, or whatever area of science he is studying, what is he trying to understand? The wisdom of Hakodosh Boruch Hu in the way He runs the physical world. "ה' בחכמה יסד." "כולם בחכמה עשית ארץ." "Unbelievable wisdom! The more a person understands the physical world, the more he is overwhelmed by the way everything connects and works together in one coordinated totality.

That is why I have mentioned a number of times that Einstein, at the end of his life, said that only an unbelievable mind could have put this whole thing together. Everything is so overwhelmingly connected, coordinated, and synchronized. A person is overwhelmed by the depth of that wisdom.

There is another perfection in His handiwork: the wisdom of Torah. When you begin to understand the unbelievable wisdom in Torah, you are overwhelmed by it. One coordinated system encompasses all of life, with unbelievable depth and breadth. Unfortunately, there are people who have never experienced that deep understanding of the wisdom of Torah. What do they do? They play games with Torah. It is not a game! There is a deep understanding of how everything fits together in one total system.

We try to understand each little piece of Torah, just as a physicist tries to understand each small piece of physics. The greater the talmid chochom, or the greater the physicist, the more he sees the total picture and how everything fits together. "תמים פעלו." Hakodosh Boruch Hu creates things with unbelievable wisdom, because it is His wisdom.

How Hakodosh Boruch Hu runs history

"כי כל דרכיו משפט." There is another wisdom of Hakodosh Boruch Hu: how He runs this world. We live in history, and history does not happen by accident. We say, "לכ שרים ומלכים ביד ה'." What do you think? Hakodosh Boruch Hu is going to let Putin, Trump, or whoever else run the world? He is running the world and using these people. What happens to me as an individual, and what happens in the total history of the world, are both being run by Him.

There was a churban gadol in the Holocaust. But even then, deep planning was going on. Hakodosh Boruch Hu planted in each place a small group of people whom He knew had the power to rebuild Torah there. In Eretz Yisroel, they planted the seeds of Torah. In the United States, they planted the seeds of Torah. Each person did his part.

Look at the very interesting way Hakodosh Boruch Hu arranged for a yeshiva to be established and Torah to spread in the United Kingdom. There was a shochet in Gateshead who had learned in Radin and sent a letter to the Chofetz Chaim. That is how Torah was planted there. Hakodosh Boruch Hu knows how to run this world. He plants the seeds and directs Klal Yisroel through history.

"כל דרכיו משפט." Everything is with a cheshbon. Russia's decision to invade Ukraine is also part of Hakodosh Boruch Hu's plan for the world. From our little standpoint, the world appears to be in chaos. In reality, Hakodosh Boruch Hu is running history toward His goals. We do not understand things while they are happening. But now I can look back eighty years and see how He planted the seeds for the growth of Torah. This one was miraculously saved, and this one was miraculously saved. These were the people who laid the groundwork for the growth of Torah and the growth of the klal.

What happened on Tisha B'Av in 1492? The Inquisition. One of the main centers of Jewish life, Spain, was destroyed. But on Tisha B'Av in 1492, an Italian Jew called Christopher Columbus left Spain, left Genoa, to

discover America, which would save Jewish lives a few hundred years later. Hakodosh Boruch Hu runs it all as a totality. It is all part of the way He runs history.

Why things happen to individuals, we do not understand. There is an interesting story about the Ramban. He had a talmid whom he thought would be his great talmid, the one who would take over from him as the leader of Klal Yisroel. All of a sudden, this prize talmid became ill. He grew worse and worse, and he was dying. The Ramban was distraught. It made no sense to him.

The Ramban knew the entire Torah with unbelievable depth, nigleh and nistar. But he still could not understand why this talmid, for whom he had such great hopes, was going to die. He told him, "When you die, your neshomo will go from one place to another. Eventually, you will reach a place where you will see everything with total clarity and understand why you had to die at this point. I want you to come back and explain it to me."

The story goes that a few days later, the talmid came to the Ramban in a dream. "It happened exactly as you said. And when I reached that place, I saw the whole world in its totality, and everything made sense. But there is no way I can explain it to someone who is not there, seeing that totality."

Is the story true? I saw it in a number of places. If it isn't true, it should be true. What does it mean? We see everything in little pieces. We do not see the whole picture. When you see the whole picture of how Hakodosh Boruch Hu is doing things, it all fits together. "כי כל דרכיו משפט."

Everything is written down

"לשלם לצדיקים צדקתם לעולם הבא, אף על." Rashi says, "קל אמונה ואין עול." Hashem will pay everyone. Everyone receives the consequences of everything he does. "והכל בספר נכתב." Every action is written down, and someday there will be an accounting.

There is another story. Again, I don't know whether all these stories are true, but if they aren't true, they should be true. The Vilna Gaon asked his mother to come back and tell him what the judgment is like in the next world. She came and said, "You cannot even imagine. Everything you do is recorded! Remember when I was walking down the street, and there was a woman on the other side? I waved to her and made her feel good. Even that is on the list of things I am paid for." Everything is written down. Nothing is forgotten.

"הכל מצדיקים עליהם את דינו." What does tzaddik mean? "צדיק וישר הוא." In the end, when everyone sees the whole picture, they agree that the judgment passed on them is correct. Yashar means straight. There are no twists and turns. No fooling around.

Now we are approaching Yom HaDin, and Yom HaDin is serious. If you get on someone's nerves and do not let him sleep when he needs to sleep in order to learn Torah, guess what? That is written down. I have to make sure people learn Torah; that is my job. But there is a bigger book, a bigger picture. It is Hakodosh Boruch Hu's picture.

When you scream at your chavrusa, "You stupid idiot!" and make him feel like two cents, that is also written down. We live in a world where everything you do has an impact. Those of you who have learned Nefesh HaChaim know this: every mitzvah, every middoh, every aveiroh. Even the little things. Waving your hand to make someone feel good has an impact in Heaven. Someday, when the whole scorecard is evaluated, it will all be part of that scorecard.

That is the message we read on Shabbos Shuvah. Hakodosh Boruch Hu has a total plan for the world. He is running the world and directing Klal Yisroel toward a goal. He has given our generation unbelievable opportunities to connect to Him through limud haTorah and to bring Moshiach. Haazinu tells us to look at the whole picture and appreciate the generation in which we live.

That is our preparation for Yom HaDin. I have to account to Hakodosh Boruch Hu for everything I did and everything I said, everyone I helped and everyone I hurt, every mitzvah and every aveiroh. Nothing is forgotten. Hakodosh Boruch Hu does not have a problem with short-term memory loss or long-term memory loss. Everything is there.

But as we head toward Yom HaDin, the most important thing is to thank Hakodosh Boruch Hu. "כי שם ה' אקרא הבו גודל." You gave me the opportunity to be born into a generation with unbelievable opportunities to serve You and connect to You. Thank You. I am going to take full advantage of those opportunities.