



One People and Collective Responsibility

Parshat Nitzavim opens with Moshe telling the people, “You are standing today – all of you – before the Lord your God.” Moshe then spells out what is meant by “All of you”; he refers to everyone, from the heads of the tribes to the drawers of water.

It seems appropriate that we read this portion in the days leading up to the Yamim Nora'im. For we might recall that soon we will all be standing equally before Hashem to admit our trespasses and to pray for Hashem's mercy. That is to say, rabbis, community heads, judges, and politicians, as private individuals, they all share something in common with the rank and file.

The Parsha teaches us that without exception, we were all present to receive and adhere to the *Brit* – the Covenant established between G-d and the people. The corollary is that whatever our status in society, we are all collectively and individually responsible for our actions and, indeed, for the deeds of others.

In truth, the Torah narrative refers specifically to those who reject Hashem's teachings and turn to idol worship. But insofar as egotistical behavior negates the will of Hashem, self-absorption is a form of idol worship: For the idol is now what *I* want, what *I* believe in, what gives *me* gratification.

Moshe indicates that a person who is so full of his own opinions that he can afford to ignore the Torah's teachings says, “I shall have peace.” One explanation is that such people tend to think (erroneously, of course) that the punishments eked out to the righteous for *their* sins will atone for them too.

Moshe further implies that such people are so intoxicated with the righteousness of their ways that they “add drunkenness to their thirst.” Rashi explains that when drunk, one acts *Beshogeg* (unintentionally, impetuously), while when quenching one's thirst, one's actions are purposeful and directed (*Bemeizid*). The Torah, however, through Moshe's lips, tells us that Hashem will ultimately judge that indignant person whether or not his actions are “accidental” or purposeful.

Later in the narrative appears the well-

known phrase that “The secret things belong to the Lord our God.” Concerning this difficult axiom, Rashi addresses the possibility that the people as a whole might suffer for the sins of a single individual whose thoughts and intentions were never revealed. Rashi explains, however, that *our* purpose is to deal with what we know, namely, that which *has* been disclosed to us, because “those things...belong to us and our children forever” (Devarim 29:28).

One conclusion we might draw from this discussion is that now, more than ever, we might ask ourselves if we are relating to possible messages of the Coronavirus.

Have we taken enough care to correct the “illnesses” that plague our people? Are we taking care to remind ourselves that we are *one* people, irrespective of our external status or position in the hierarchy of leadership in society? And, finally, are we taking enough care to check that *our* activities, however seemingly well-intentioned, have not harmed, or are not compromising, our fellow citizens and society as a whole? ■

Shabbat Shalom!

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