

## Parshat Nitzavim & Vayelech: Symbiotic Song

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles  
Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

The last of the 613 mitzvot is to “write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel.” What song is Hashem referring to? Rashi says that this mitzvah refers to Parshat Haazinu, which immediately follows this parsha. Biblical song is elevating and joyous. Yet, if we look at the text of Parshat Haazinu, we notice that most of it is very depressing. It tells of our straying from the path Hashem has laid out for us in His Torah and the terrible tragedies that therefore will ensue. How is this uplifting and joyous? All the commentators agree that Haazinu is definitely song. The Sefat Emet cites Tehillim where King David writes, “Of kindness and justice do I sing.” Bnei Yisrael have the capacity to see God’s love both in His kindnesses and in His justice, when He chastises us to bring us closer to Him. While the Netivot Shalom agrees that most of the shira is chastisement, he chooses to focus on the last few verses of Haazinu. There Hashem reassures us that He will avenge the blood of His servants and appease His land and His people. This is Hashem’s promise to us, that even if we are not worthy, He will never forget us. He will redeem us. This promise is a source of great encouragement throughout our history, and a powerful reason to sing.

Most of the Torah commentators, however, believe the “song” referred to here is the

entire Torah. They derive from this verse the mitzvah that every Jew must write his own Sefer Torah, a mitzvah that can be fulfilled by writing even one letter, as a single missing letter can invalidate the entire scroll and filling it in can make the entire scroll kosher again. How can the entire Torah be referred to as a song, especially since it is not written in poetic format? We can answer this question by examining the differences between song/poetry and prose. Haamek Davar notes that prose is generally writing that is meant to be fully understood upon its initial reading. Poetry, on the other hand, is defined by its “economy of language” and the particular elements that add shades of meaning to the lines. Each word and letter of the Torah offers greater insights into meaning, allusions, inferences, and secrets using the four basic elements (PaRDe”S) to uncover as many as 70 different interpretations of the text.

Rav Reiss uses the poetic image from Shir Hashirim to further explain this: “The King brought me into His chambers.” When viewed from the outside, the castle is magnificent. However, as one enters and goes from room to room, his awe grows as he encounters greater richness and beauty. So, too, with Torah study. During a cursory reading, one can already recognize the Torah’s splendor. However, as one delves ever more deeply into the text, one marvels at all the myriad nuances and textures that continue to be revealed.

Shirah, however, is song as well as poetry. Music can only be appreciated when the notes blend together to form a harmonious whole. Similarly, the Torah too must be appreciated as a whole more than any particular part. This is what King David meant, posits Rav Reiss, when he wrote, “The Torah of Hashem is perfect (complete); it restores the soul.” Only when the Torah is studied and observed in its entirety does it have the ability to restore one’s soul.

Rabbi I. Schwartz notes that all the mitzvot have one ultimate goal, to bring us closer to Hashem. This is the same reasoning that Rabbi Jacobson uses. If we were to make a list of everything we do each day it would appear to be very pedestrian. However, if we can find one uniting factor, it would add meaning to it all. We can make a conscious effort to see meaning even in eating and drinking as a means to energize us toward a meaningful life of Torah and mitzvot. While Torah study and observance can be difficult at times, we can always find the strength to sing. Song is a spontaneous expression of our innermost souls. This is what Torah should be. It must become part of our very essence, as Rav Dessler teaches us. When Bnei Yisroel delve deeply into Torah study and give it voice, they sing the praises of Hashem and bear witness to His sovereignty over earth.

## Elul: Five Steps To Greatness

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles

What is the definition of greatness? What do we hope to achieve in Elul? When I posed this question to one of my children, she answered, "V'ani kirvat Elokim li tov"-And for me closeness to Hashem is good. A great person is one who can reach a level of *kirvat Hashem*.

Rav Pincus in Nefesh Chaya, lists five steps to greatness. This is based on a statement of Chazal which describes the service of the angels. These five attributes are listed as follows:

- 1) They appear as a lightning bolt
- 2) Where they go has no end
- 3) They go forward and backward
- 4) They do Hashem's will like a storm
- 5) They bow in front of Hashem's throne

These five elements give us direction on how to reach our goal of coming closer to Hashem. Human nature tends to make us aspire to reach tremendous heights in avodat Hashem, while we simultaneously tell ourselves 'we'll never get there'. Saying, "Why should I bother trying," is a mistake. Rav Pincus notes that even if we never reach the highest point, if we touch a lightning bolt, a flash of it, we are still considered successful. Rav Dessler teaches us that ambition and believing in oneself is crucial. If a person wants to reach a certain level in avodat Hashem, he must have a

feeling of bitachon. He may not be successful one hundred percent but if he continues forward and accomplishes one aspect of his goal then to a certain degree he's been successful. In Kol Dodi, Rav Schwadron explains how people take on different kabalot in Elul and then fall back to routine. A person may think it was all for nothing but that is wrong. Every good deed makes an impression. Touching greatness propels a person forward.

Sometimes we won't do something because it seems petty, and we think, "Why should I involve myself in something so miniscule?" This is wrong. There is nothing too small for Hashem who feeds the tiniest insects and directs every detailed aspect of our lives. Minor acts such as a smile, a compliment, or a cheery good morning can make the greatest difference. These small things have no end. Additionally, every mitzvah whether significant or minor has tremendous importance. It's all part of one integrated system. In Alei Shor, Rav Wolbe notes that doing any mitzvah properly can draw the Shechina down.

This world is a journey of ups and downs. The forward and backward movements of the angels parallel our own ascending and descending. Rav Nissel writes that Hashem created man in order to give him pleasure. The ultimate pleasure is a relationship with Hashem which is formed through prayer. Troubles are a catalyst for a person to daven and awaken to

the fact that we are dependent on Hashem. If a person is in a constant state of communing with Hashem when things are going well, he will not need any suffering to remind him. This is the secret of the shofar. "Tekiah"-the straight blasts are when things are going well. "Shevarim"-the broken blasts signify the setbacks in life. "Ashrei ha'am yodeiah teruah Hashem b'eor panecha yaleichun"-The breakages in life are a means for us to walk on the path of Hashem.

We must emulate the angels and do Hashem's will with fiery zeal. Being sensitive to detail, davening to Hashem with intent, and performing the mitzvot with enthusiasm, inspires passion. Rav Frand notes that children shouldn't experience mitzvot as a burden but as an enjoyable aspect of life. Our avodah in Elul is to work on our mitzvot, not only on our aveiroth. We can never say we've reached it. Even if one thinks one has arrived, we need to bow down and realize there is still a long way to go.

This Elul let us work towards greatness by knowing what are ambitions are, being careful with the small details in life, understanding that life's ups and downs are a catalyst for growth and prayer, and that we're just on a point of departure in our journey towards Hashem.

## Elul & Rosh Hashana-Merciful Judgement #9

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Avishai David

One of the most beautiful and powerful *piyutim* on Rosh Hashana is the prayer of *Unesaneh Tokef*. The first part of the hymn is imbued with tension. Hashem sits on the throne of judgment and we are passive and forced to watch while our deeds pass before Him, and our verdict is determined.

Then a lifeline is thrown out to us and the tone of the *piyut* is transformed to mercy. The Chazan intones, "Uteshuva, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah...", repentance, prayer, and charity annul the evil decree." We become active. Our ability to do *teshuva*, to pray, and to give *tzedaka* can turn Hashem's *din* easily to *rachamim*. In fact, the Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva writes that even a *rasha* on the day of his death can do *teshuva* and Hashem will accept it.

After this injection of hope, the *piyut* portrays Hashem as the architect of man who is privy to his weaknesses. Ultimately, life is like a passing dream and man's existence on this earth is fleeting. The Chayei Adam, in Tefila Zaka, gives expression to this concept. Man confesses that he did not sin to provoke Hashem but rather the *yetzer hara* ensnared him and the travails of life combined with the innate failings of man led him off the proper path.

There is a dialectic tensile balance between judgment and mercy, which is essentially at the heart of what Rosh Hashana is all about. It is a day of *din* tinged on both sides with *rachamim*. Before *tekiat shofar*, we say, "Ashrei h'aam yodei

*teruah*. Happy is the nation that knows *teruah*," the secret of taking *midat hadin* and engulfing it with *rachamim*. The Ramban terms this *hamtakat hadin*, sweetening the judgment.

In the prayers of Rosh Hashana, there is a recurrent theme of transforming judgment to mercy. On the first day of Rosh Hashana, the Torah reading is about the birth of Yitzchak who represents *din*. On the second day, we read about *akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding of *din* replaced by *rachamim*. Anyone who recites the *piyut* of *Unesaneh Tokef* with proper concentration can sense the atmosphere change from tense truth to joyful mercy which breaks through the barriers of nature. May we merit Hashem's *rachamim* and be inscribed in the Book of Life.