

## Parshas Nitzavim- Valelech 5762

There is a גמרא in מגילה that I quoted in my letter in the bulletin. It was also quoted by my father last week, here in shul. I imagine that there are few רבנים who will not have quoted this גמרא either this week, or last week.

It is a גמרא that rises unbidden to our minds, and hearts, and mouths, this ראש השנה.

The Gemara in ל"א דף מגילה says, why do we read the קללות of the תוכחה - the terrible predictions of calamity in תבואה - פרשת כי תבוא - right before ראש השנה? כדי שתכלה? שנה, in order that the קללות of the past year come to an end, together with the year itself.

Certainly at the close of this very difficult year for the Jewish people, that is a sentiment that we can all echo.

Actually there is an obvious difficulty, which is raised by תוספות. We read the קללות last week, in תבואה. Today is the last Shabbos before ראש השנה, and we read נצבים. If we want to read the קללות at the end of the year, then today would be the time to read them.

Last week my father addressed this question, from a certain perspective. I would like to offer, today, a different perspective.

We have to understand: How does reading the קללות help to bring them to an end? Is this just a pious sentiment, a wish?

Joke about patient who comes to doctor - what's wrong with me? You have a virus. עבירות? I know I have עבירות, but what's wrong with me?

The truth is that this joke expresses a deep truth. One of our most basic beliefs is that everything that happens in this world - the joyous, and the tragic - is ultimately the result of הקב"ה's providence, and His משפט. We don't always understand that משפט, and we don't know all the rules by which it operates. But even in the face of tragedy we affirm צדקתך צדק, that הקב"ה is just, and it is His משפט at work in the world.

I quoted a joke; להבדיל, let me quote a Gemara:

Gemara in Sanhedrin צ"ו, when נבוכדנצר destroyed ביהמ"ק he was proud of his accomplishment. A קול בת קול laughed at him and said: עמא קטילא קטלת, היכלא קליא: קלית, the people you killed were already dead, the ביהמ"ק you burned was already destroyed. The ultimate cause of their death and its destruction was the גזר דין in שמים, and you had only the dubious privilege of being the instrument.

Our enemies today have no more power to harm us on their own than did נבוכדנצר, long ago. מן השמים they could have the power to harm even one hair on a Jew's head. And therefore as we approach the ראש השנה of דין we have to realize that that everything that our people have undergone - all of the קללות that כלל ישראל has experienced this past year - were conceived - not in the minds of our enemies - but in the משפט of הקב"ה, and in the דין that took place on ראש השנה one year ago, when the books of משפט last lay open.

And here, I believe, lies the meaning of שנה וקללותיה. This is why we read the תוכחה before ראש השנה: To remind ourselves that the קללות we experience are not random events, but pages out of the תוכחה, part of the משפט of הקב"ה.

And that is the lesson of the תוכחה, and of פרשת כי תבוא, which we read last week: That what happens to our people, both the good things and the bad, are part of the משפט of הקב"ה, who is המשפט.

And that is a lesson we need to remember before ראש השנה.

But there is another important lesson to remember, and that is the lesson of this פרשה. And that is that the purpose of all this משפט, the purpose of the ברכות and likewise of the קללות, is ultimately to bring us back to הקב"ה. As we read today:

והיה כי יבאו עליך כל הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה ... ושבת עד ה' אלקיך ...

And here, I would suggest, lies the answer to Tosafos's question: Why, before ראש השנה, do we read not only פרשת כי תבוא, which contains the קללות themselves, but also פרשת נצבים.

And the answer is that נצבים is the parsha of תשובה, and it is through תשובה alone that the תוכחה achieves its purpose.

It is פרשת נצבים which gives meaning to פרשת כי תבוא, And it is our תשובה alone, that can give meaning - and closure - to the קללות we have experienced this past year.

And the more we realize that, the deeper that realization goes - the more the תוכחה achieves its end, and so the more likely that the קללות can come to closure.

And that is the real meaning of שנה וקללותיה.

This past year has been one of the worst - perhaps the worst - that the Jewish people have experienced in half a century. It has seen hundred of Jews in ארץ

murdered, thousands maimed, whole families wiped out. It has seen a virtual explosion of anti-semitism around the world. In England, a respected Oxford professor - who broadcasts for the BBC - suggests that Jews who move to Israel should be taken out and shot, and his comments are considered by the intellectual establishment to be well within the pale of academic discourse. And at the same time a member of Parliament says in public that the Jews have it coming to them, and finally we can say it out loud. And in this climate, Jews in Europe are once again afraid to walk the streets.

And, of course, the terrible events of September 11th, **whose יארצייט is today - כ"ג אלול**. And if that is not, strictly speaking, an event of the past year - since it took place in תשס"א - it certainly cast its terrible shadow over this entire year. And because of that event, we too now live in the shadow of terror.

As we stand at the brink of the ימים נוראים, on this day of ערב סליחות, we need to take these lessons to heart. These are not distant events. The people in ארץ ישראל are our friends and relatives, our parents and siblings and children. The people who perished in the WTC were our friends and neighbors. The קללות are very real and very close.

And our response must be that which is spelled out in the פרשה today: בצר לך ומצאוך הדברים האלה... ושבת עד ה' אי קהילה. We have to look into ourselves and our own lives and take stock, both individually and as a קהילה. We have to ask ourselves seriously: What can I do, what can we do, to come close to the רבונו של עולם? How can we do תשובה?

Of course, teshuvah is a very broad concept. Perhaps too broad. It's very hard to even begin to get a handle on it. But perhaps we can use a lesson that R' Yisroel Salanter used to teach. R' Yisroel used to say that a person should choose one area, one specific issue, and focus on that. Just one thing. But that has a ripple effect. Because all of life is connected, all of Judaism is connected. And if we can improve one part, then that will effect the whole.

And I would like to suggest, therefore, that we as a קהילה should try this coming year to work on that one area which is, of course, most central to a shul, namely תפילה. That, at least, is something specific. Let us try together to find ways to

make our davening better; more serious, more heartfelt, more intense. And let us try together to find ways to minimize those things that detract from our davening.

For example, perhaps there are שיעורים we can institute that will enhance our davening. Incidentally, the Tuesday night שיעור will be beginning מסכת ברכות after סכות, which deals with ענייני תפילה, and that is an opportunity to strengthen our understanding of what תפילה is about. Perhaps there are other שיעורים and classes that we can arrange - for men and women - that will enhance our davening.

Certainly I would like to see less talking during davening, and more singing. One of our great sages once said that music is the language of the heart, and heartfelt davening should express itself in heart-felt song.

And if we put our minds to it, I don't doubt that we will together be able to find other aspects of davening that we can improve, and other ways to improve them.

And if we can improve our תפילה, even incrementally, than that will have a powerful effect on the rest of our lives. If we can raise the level of our תפילה, then that will raise the level of our אידישקייט altogether. And to that degree we will have fulfilled the mandate of this weeks פרשה, פרשת אלקיך, פרשת ושב. ושב עד ה' אלקיך, פרשה.

And so we pray that, indeed, תכלה שנה וקללותיה, these troubles will come to an end, and we will merit a שנה טובה ומתוקה, for ourselves and for all of ישראל.