

**LIGHT
FROM
THE
FUTURE
PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILCH**

**BY
HESCHEL GREENBERG**

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE ESSAYS ON PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

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LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who, more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

- 1. UNITED WE STAND**
- 2. WHO BLESSES THE NEW YEAR?**
- 3. WHY.**
- 4. STANDING FIRM AND CLIMBING EVEN HIGHER**
- 5. HEARING THE SOUNDS OF SINAI**
- 6. NO MORE SECRETS**
- 7. NO SECRETS**
- 8. ULTIMATE LIFE AND GOODNESS**
- 9. IT'S NOT IN HEAVEN**
- 10. DIGGING FOR THE ROOTS WITH THE SHOFAR**
- 11. THE YEAR OF TESHUAH-SALVATION**
- 12. THE SEEN STEPS OF CLOSENESS**
- 13. THE POWER OF PREPARATION**
- 14. BRINGING LIGHT INTO THE DARKNESS AND
REMOVING DARKNESS FROM THE LIGHT**

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

15. THE LAST MITZVAH-THE SEAL OF JUDAISM

16. THE SONG THAT NEVER ENDS

17. NO STANDING!

18. RISE UP!

19. BEYOND E PLURIBUS UNUM

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 22 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

“The time of your Redemption has arrived.”

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning about Moshiach and Redemption has the capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *galus/exile* mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

* * *

The Parsha Nitzavim-Vayeielch contain explicit references to the future Messianic Age.

ESSAY ONE

UNITED WE STAND

By accepting every Jew, regardless of their lowly status, we demonstrate that our love for our fellow is not just predicated on the logical premise that we should accept and love those who are good role models.

Even those, who do not possess any overt qualities, we still accept and love, simply because they are part of our Jewish community; our shared history, destiny and our very soul.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY ONE

UNITED WE STAND

Reflection of Holiday Themes

This Shabbos in which we read the double Parsha *Netzavim-Vayeilech* is the last one of the year. According to the *Shaloh*, despite the fact that the Torah reading schedule was made independently of the cycle of Jewish holidays, every Torah reading reflects the themes of the Holiday that occurs within that week.

One of the obvious themes that both this Parsha and Rosh Hashanah share is the theme of Teshuvah (repentance-return) Rosh Hashanah is the first of the Ten Days of Teshuvah.

Upon deeper reflection, one might argue that the theme of Teshuvah is more forcefully associated with the days **following** Rosh Hashanah. Besides the fact that we almost never make mention of our sins and repentance for them on Rosh Hashanah itself, Rosh Hashanah is known

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

primarily as the Day of Judgment rather than the Day of Teshuvah. We must, therefore, find a connection between this week's Parsha and the theme of judgment that occurs on Rosh Hashanah.

You are Standing Firmly *Today* – Rosh Hashanah

Upon deeper reflection, we shall see that the connection to Rosh Hashanah appears at the very beginning of the Parsha which states: “You are standing firmly today...”

On the surface, these were part of Moses' farewell address to the Jewish people. But, according to R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi (known as the Alter Rebbe, the author of the Tanya, the primary text of Chassidic literature), the word “today” refers to the day of Rosh Hashanah. And the Torah in this week's Parsha informs us that we all stand firmly on this Day of Judgment. This means that we will be victorious in our judgment.

One can ask the following question. If Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, G-d obviously, scrutinizes our every deed, how then can we be so confident that we will prevail in our judgment?

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Unity is Victory

The answer has actually been furnished by the Torah itself. The answer will become apparent when we read the verse in its entirety:

“You are all standing firmly today, all of you before the L-rd your G-d; your heads, your tribes, your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones your wives, and your stranger that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood unto the drawer of your water.”

The key to being victorious is thus for all of us to stand together.

But, even this prescription begs for an explanation. Why would G-d overlook our flaws just because we stand together?

Canaanite Tribe's Deception

One of the answers lies in the identification of the diverse categories enumerated in the Parsha. The two last categories were the hewers of wood and the water carriers. These people, our Sages tell us, were members of a Canaanite tribe who deceived Moses (just as a similar tribe tricked Joshua) into converting them and accepting them

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

into the Jewish community. Because of their deviousness, they were relegated to the position of wood-choppers and water carriers. Despite their lowly status, Moses exhorted the Jewish people to always remain united with them.

Unconditional Love

Similarly, on Rosh Hashanah, we must express our unity with all Jews, including those who might possess serious flaws.

By accepting every Jew, regardless of their lowly status, we demonstrate that our love for our fellow is not just predicated on the logical premise that we should accept and love those who are good role models. Even those, who do not possess any overt qualities, we still accept and love, simply because they are part of our Jewish community.

Behaving Irrationally

By behaving in this “irrational” manner and overlooking people’s shortcomings, we cause G-d to act in a similar manner. Just as we accepted others notwithstanding their less than exemplary behavior and character, the A-mighty will accept us in judgment, despite the flaws we possess.

The reading of this parsha thus is a most fitting prelude to

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

the day of Rosh Hashanah.

And just as Jewish unity is crucial as we enter the New Year, so is it imperative for our entering into the new era, the Age of Redemption that we have awaited for so long.

May you all be inscribed and sealed for a good and sweet year!

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY TWO

WHO BLESSES THE NEW YEAR?

The divine energies that are generated on any given Holiday are dependent on our actions to make them more revealed and pronounced.

When there is no prior announcement on our part on the Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah, the spiritual energies that are in effect on Rosh Hashanah remain so subtle, that the Satan does not realize that Rosh Hashanah is coming.

The spiritual energies of Rosh Hashanah are very subtle and only we the Jewish people are aware of it, not the Satan.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY TWO

WHO BLESSES THE NEW YEAR?

Source of All Blessings

Every Jewish month is prefaced by a Sabbath known as Shabbos Mevarchim, the Sabbath that blesses the new month. At that time, a special prayer-blessing is recited, that blesses the new month.

The reason for this tradition is that Shabbos is the source of all blessings, and every Shabbos bestows blessing on the forthcoming week. The Shabbos before the new month, bestows a special measure of blessing on the entire month. The Shabbos before a wedding is the *Aufruf*, or the time when the bridegroom is called up to the Torah, because, both the Shabbos and Torah are the source of all blessing.

It would follow then, that the special month of Tishrei, the beginning of the New Year, would certainly want to be blessed on the Shabbos before. Yet, the custom is that we do not bless the new month of Tishrei on the preceding

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Shabbos. This omission begs for an explanation. There are several reasons for this anomaly.

Confusing the Satan

One of the reasons offered by a student of Rashi (*Machzor Vitri*) is that there is a desire on our part to confuse the Satan – the prosecuting angel – who waits for Rosh Hashanah to present all of our transgressions before the heavenly courts. If we do not publicly announce the upcoming month and its Holidays in Synagogue, the Satan won't know on which day Rosh Hashanah falls.

To better understand this explanation, it should be noted that the Satan – contrary to misconceptions about Satan that have their roots in non-Jewish sources – is a spiritual agent – an angel like any other – whose sorry (albeit G-d given) job happens to be to dole out judgement and serve as an obstacle for the Jewish people. As such, the Satan is attuned with the spiritual energies that are generated at certain times of the year similar to all angels. It would then be natural for the Satan to sense when Rosh Hashanah occurs. However, the divine energies that are generated on any given Holiday are dependent on **our** actions to make them more revealed and pronounced. When there is no prior announcement on our part on the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah, the spiritual energies that are in effect on Rosh Hashanah remain so subtle, that the Satan does not realize that Rosh Hashanah is coming. Rosh Hashanah is therefore described in the book of Psalms as the festival that is “*b’keseh*” which means concealed. This means that the spiritual energies of Rosh Hashanah are very subtle and only we the Jewish people are aware of it, not the Satan.

G-d’s Blessing

The Ba’al Shem Tov – the founder of the Chassidic movement, whose birthday we just celebrated on the 18th of Elul – gave the following explanation s to why we do not bless the month of Tishrei:.

“The seventh month (Tishrei), first of the months of the year, is blessed by G-d Himself, on Shabbos Mevarchim – the last Shabbos in the month of Elul. With this power (i.e.: the power of G-d’s blessing of the seventh month) Israel blesses the other months eleven times a year.”

The Ba’al Shem Tov adds that the content of G-d’s blessing is encapsulated in the opening statement of this week’s Torah portion of Netzavim: ‘Atem nitzavim hayom, You stand this day’ This day refers to Rosh Hashanah, the day

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

of Judgment ... Yet you remain standing firmly upright, meaning – you will be vindicated in judgment.

On the Shabbos preceding Rosh Hashanah, we read the parsha of Atem Nitzavim, which is G-d's blessing on the Shabbos-of-blessing of the seventh month. That seventh month (Tishrei) is itself sated – and in turn satiates all Israel – with an abundance of good for the duration of the (coming) year."

Underlying these words of the Ba'al Shem Tov is the notion that the means to achieving G-d's blessing for the new year, is Jewish unity. Thus, in the verse that speaks of our standing firmly, it continues, "all of you, before G-d your G-d, your heads, your tribes, your elders...and thy stranger that is in the midst of thy camp, from the hewer of wood unto the drawer of thy water.."

By listing all these different categories of Jews from the most prominent and influential to the (seemingly) least important, the implication is clear: The way to guarantee our victory in G-d's judgment is through the realization that all classes of Jews are inextricably bound together and form one organic unit.

As we stand together with the realization that all of our differences unite to form one complete Jewish nation, G-d will certainly give us a year that will be characterized by

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

unity and harmony. Indeed, this unity will make us even more receptive to the ultimate blessing and victory in judgment – the true and complete Redemption, by our righteous Moshiach

ESSAY THREE

WHY?!

While the forces of unmitigated evil have wreaked havoc on the bodies and buildings of thousands of Americans, evil cannot and will not destroy the spirit of our nation and the souls of its victims.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY THREE

WHY?!

This essay was written right after the tragic events of 9/11.

How do we Console Ourselves?

Our minds and hearts have been numbed.

We have all become victims of history's most heinous terrorist act.

We are now grieving for the horrendous loss of precious life. And at this time so many questions plague us.

Why?

How could this unspeakable atrocity have occurred?

How do we console ourselves?

Do we even try and do we even have the right to comfort ourselves, knowing the extent of the carnage?

Should we be filled with rage?

And, of course, the perennial question when tragedy

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

strikes:

Why did this happen?

No Despair

These and other questions we must leave unanswered because we cannot possibly understand G-d's ways, as the Torah states in this week's Parsha: "The hidden matters are for G-d our G-d..." Nevertheless, we must seek to answer one question, particularly as we get ready to take leave of this year, 5761 and enter into the new year 5762.

What are we to do?

In formulating a response to the situation, it seems clear that message is: We cannot and must not despair!

While the forces of unmitigated evil have wreaked havoc on the bodies and buildings of thousands of Americans, evil cannot and will not destroy the spirit of our nation and the souls of its victims.

And because this was evil's attempt at destroying our nation and indeed the civilized world, we must do everything to respond to that evil by unprecedented acts of goodness and holiness. To be sure, those who can assist with the rescue effort should assist, those who can give blood should give, those who can comfort the relatives of

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

those who were lost should, by all means, do it.

But, I suspect, that much more is expected of us at this time.

Fighting Evil with Light

To appreciate what it is that is demanded of us we must not delude ourselves. This is war! And we must all mobilize ourselves to fight this evil by doing unprecedented good.

As Jews we cannot stop and be content with general acts of goodness. We must do that and more. For this assault, though directed against the U.S. and civilization the way we know it, was also intended to hurt the Jewish people and the Land of Israel in particular.

And if the attack was against our Jewishness, we must also respond resoundingly by an increase in our Jewishness: More Torah study, more observance of the commandments, more Tzedakah, more support of Jewish educational institutions, etc.

Evil's Last Stand

And while we cannot possibly make sense of this colossal tragedy; we must realize that it was part of evil's last stand

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

against the forces of goodness and holiness before the onset of the Redemption through Moshiach.

Maimonides formulated the Thirteen Principles of Faith that form the foundation of Judaism. One of these principles is to believe that Moshiach — a human Jewish leader steeped in Torah knowledge and deeply committed to the practice of Judaism — will, with G-d's help, of course, usher in an age of peace that will also involve the return of all Jews to the Land of Israel.

However, the road to this age of peace, has been a rocky one, punctuated with millennia of hardship and persecution for the Jewish people. Our Sages of old, based on Biblical texts, have also informed us that the final struggle that we will have to endure will involve the struggle for Jerusalem.

Recent events have made it clear that the world is at a crossroad. One direction is the direction of the forces of hatred and evil and the other is a world of holiness and peace. Part of the process of bringing about the Redemption is to believe in it, anticipate it, yearn for it and live in accordance with its goals.

Forget the Philosophical Explanations

Returning to the question of why, the truth be stated, most

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

of us do **not** want to hear a philosophical explanation for this catastrophe. What we do want is for G-d to take us into His embrace and comfort us. This will happen when Moshiach will come imminently and allow G-d's presence in this world to become manifest and the evil will be relegated to the history books.

However, as we await this “embrace” we must do our part by embracing one another (figuratively and where appropriate literally) and embracing our G-d, His Torah and Mitzvot.

In the opening words of this week's Parsha:

“All of you today (a reference to Rosh Hashanah) stand firmly before G-d Your G-d, your leaders... every Jewish person.”

We stand firmly and will prevail when we all stand together as **one people**, with the realization that we have **one G-d**, whose teachings of the **one Torah** we follow.

May we all be inscribed and sealed for a good and sweet year!

ESSAY FOUR

STANDING FIRM AND CLIMBING EVEN HIGHER

Shabbos is a day of rest also in the sense that the normal resistance we experience to spiritual matters is neutralized.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY FOUR

STANDING FIRM AND CLIMBING EVEN HIGHER

How Many Torah Portions are there?

How many Torah portions are there? The answer depends on how you count them. If we were to separate all of the Torah portions into separate sections, there would be a grand total of 54. Yet the accepted number is 53. Indeed, the Hebrew word *Gan*-garden has the numerical value of 53, alluding to the Torah's status as a veritable garden. How do we account for this discrepancy?

In truth, there are only 53 portions. This week's Parsha, *Netzavim* and *Vayeilech* are usually combined, as it is this year, because they are essentially one Parsha. However in certain years, this Parsha is split into two portions.

When Rosh Hashanah occurs on a Shabbos —as it does this year— or on a Thursday, the Torah portion remains intact as one. Only when Rosh Hashanah occurs on a Monday or Tuesday, does it become necessary to split the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

parsha into two readings.

Now the simple reason for this distinction is that when Rosh Hashanah occurs on a Monday or Tuesday, then we are left with more Sabbaths to the year than there are Torah portions. We have thus no choice and are compelled to take the parsha of *Nitzavim* and *Vayeilech* and split it into two. When Rosh Hashanah occurs on Shabbos, we read a specific selection of the Torah that discusses Rosh Hashanah and we do not read the weekly Torah portion. Similarly, if Rosh Hashanah occurs on a Thursday, Yom Kippur will occur on Shabbos, and the Torah reading then will be a specific Yom Kippur reading and not the weekly parsha. In those situations there is precisely the right number of weeks left and no need to split a single parsha into two.

We must try to understand, the spiritual meaning in all this. In addition, we must try to understand why, of all Torah portions, do we split the one of *Nitzavim* and *Vayeilech*.

Standing Firm

Nitzvaim does not just mean standing. It means standing firm and victorious. The Hebrew word for standing is *omdim*. In a spiritual context, the difference between the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

two parallels the difference between a person who has struggled his entire life to conquer his weaknesses and to develop healthy traits, but who is still vulnerable and the individual who has successfully reached his goal and is firmly ensconced in his new position of triumph over their frailties.

However, even when one has attained the status of *Nitzavim*, they must realize that they cannot stay in one place. Not only is there always room for improvement, one must also begin a completely new journey, to scale new heights. Thus, the name of the second section of the *parsha*, *Vayeilech*, “And he went,” implying that Moses, in spite of the phenomenal achievements of his life, realized on his dying day, that he must continue to move to newer and higher levels.

Occasional Pause

And while this lesson can usually be applied to everyone, there are some people and some occasions when we cannot demand that one make the immediate transition from *Nitzavim*-standing firm and *Vayeilech*-moving onward. In some-albeit, the minority of—situations one must pause between their attainments and the need to go on.

When Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur occur on a

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Shabbos—as in this year—we do not have to “split” the *parsha*, for the Shabbos itself enables us to quickly internalize the newly attained spiritual heights and to be ready to “travel” on. Shabbos is a day of rest also in the sense that the normal resistance we experience to spiritual matters is neutralized. Hence, we don’t have to expend additional energy to maintain our newly attained spiritual position. We can make an easy transition into the mode of continued growth.

During those years that both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur occur on ordinary weekdays, the climb to the top is that much more precarious. One has to contend with “weekday” distractions. One has to engage in a struggle to maintain one’s balance. When these Holy Days occur on a Shabbos, the day of rest and delight, we are endowed with Divine assistance to remain ensconced at the top of the mountain; the road is peaceful and invigorating. One can then easily reach for the next level for there is no need to fear backsliding from the level just attained.

The Messianic Age has been designated as a Shabbos Age. From the time of Adam and Eve, six millennia have elapsed, corresponding to the six days of the week... The Messianic Age, which will coincide with the seventh millennia, is therefore the Sabbath of creation. One of the implications of this designation is that no matter how high we can

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

climb, we will never have to fear that we will backslide. Every day, in the Messianic Age, will be a day of both *Nitzvaim* and *Vayeilech*. We will stand firm on the new turf of spiritual victory and we will simultaneously be capable of soaring to even greater heights.

Thus, this year, when we celebrate Rosh Hashanah on Shabbos, we are given a sample of what life will be like in the Messianic Age.

May we all be inscribed and sealed for a good and sweet year! *L'Shana Tova Umesukah!*

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY FIVE

HEARING THE SOUNDS OF SINAI

There are times, however, when the echoes of Sinai are muted.

The combined effect of our physical bodies, animal souls, materialistic pursuits and indulgences, transgressions and the very phenomenon of being in a stifling exile can so stifle and mute the sounds of Sinai that we don't even entertain fleeting feelings of Teshuvah.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY FIVE

HEARING THE SOUNDS OF SINAI

Redundancy

Parshas Nitzavim always precedes Rosh Hashanah. This implies that there is an organic connection between this parsha and the New Year that commences with Rosh Hashanah, the Ten Days of Teshuvah and Yom Kippur. The obvious connection between Nitzavim and these Days of Awe is that their central theme is Teshuvah, often translated as “repentance”, and more precisely as “return.”

In this week’s parsha the Torah states:

“...when all these things come upon you among all the nations where G-d your G-d, has banished you—the blessing and the curse which I have set before you—you will take it to your heart, and **you will return to G-d**, your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul. You will listen to His voice, to everything that I am commanding you today, you

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

and your children. Then G-d will return your captives...”

The key words in this section are: “You will return to G-d your G-d... you will listen to His voice.”

One can ask what the Torah means when it says “you will listen to His voice?” If listening to G-d’s voice simply means to follow His commandments it would be redundant, for listening to G-d’s commandments is mentioned explicitly in this verse. Why is there is no need to state both “you will listen to His voice” and “to everything that I am commanding you”? It could have stated: “You will listen to His commandments.”

An answer to this question can be given by using a novel approach to understanding what it means to “listen to G-d’s voice.” It is not simply a reference to complying with the commandments. Rather, it refers to hearing a heavenly voice that emanates from Mount Sinai, which is a prelude to listening to the commandants.

Return, Except Acher

The Talmud (Chagigah 15a) relates the tragic and rather unusual story of a great Sage, Elisha ben Avuyah, who became a renegade. He flouted Jewish law and brazenly

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

violated the most fundamental teachings of the Torah. As a result of his transformation into an apostate, he was nicknamed “Acher—the Other One.” Rabbi Meir, one of his loyal disciples, decided not to abandon him and continued to study under him. The Talmud states that Rabbi Meir knew how to distinguish the good from the bad. He likened his learning from Acher to one who eats a fruit and spits out the pit.

The Talmud relates that one Shabbos, as Acher was riding his horse (a forbidden activity on the Sabbath), Rabbi Meir walked alongside him and listened to Acher expound the teachings of the Torah. At a certain point, Acher reminded Rabbi Meir that he had reached the limit (2,000 cubits) a Jew may walk outside of the city limits so that he would return. Rabbi Meir took Acher’s literal suggestion of returning and challenged Acher to return in the figurative sense of the word and do Teshuvah.

Acher’s response was, “Everyday there is a heavenly voice that emerges from Sinai that states, “Return, errant children. When I hear that voice it is stated with a caveat: ‘except for Acher!’” Acher was convinced that he had transgressed so egregiously that all the doors for his return had been shut.

In truth, Chassidic thought teaches us that even Acher was not beyond salvation. Even if G-d declared that the doors

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

were shut for him, it only meant that he was expected to do a more energetic Teshuvah and thereby “break down” the barriers that would not let him enter G-d’s domain. According to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (Kedushas Levi-Tavo), he could not rely on heavenly voices to do Teshuvah, he had to generate his return on his own.

What emerges from this Talmudic discussion is that G-d generates a voice from Sinai that admonishes us to do Teshuvah and return to Him.

Who Hears the voice?

The Ba’al Shem Tov asked an obvious question:

If most people who are in need of doing Teshuvah don’t hear this voice that emerges from Sinai, of what avail is it? And those spiritually advanced people that do hear the voice don’t need it.

The Ba’al Shem Tov answered that while our conscious mind does not hear this voice, the part of the soul that is not cloaked within our body does indeed hear the voice emerging from Sinai and relays its subliminal message to the conscious mind. When this occurs we feel inspired, if only for a few seconds, and we harbor thoughts of Teshuvah. So whenever we feel inspired, especially when

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

the inspiration is spontaneous, it is a sign that our soul has just heard that heavenly voice.

Muted

There are times, however, when even the echoes of Sinai are muted. The combined effect of our physical bodies, animal souls, materialistic pursuits and indulgences, transgressions and the very phenomenon of being in a stifling exile can so stifle and mute the sounds of Sinai that we don't even entertain fleeting feelings of Teshuvah.

How do we overcome this desensitization process?

The answer is provided in the verses that were cited above.

“...when all these things come upon you among all the nations where G-d your G-d, has banished you—the blessing and the curse which I have set before you—you will take it to your heart, and you will return to G-d, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul. You will listen to His voice...”

Feeling the pain and the curses of exile empowers us to break through the resistance that we have developed and allows for the free flow of our soul's inspiration into our consciousness.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

To be sure, we do not ask for pain and suffering or for the extension of the exile, G-d forbid. On the contrary, all of our prayers are punctuated with the most heartfelt pleas to G-d to end the suffering. But yet, after the fact, we should recognize that the hidden blessing in all of the past travail is that it helps us break our resistance to hearing the sounds of Sinai.

Preferably, it is the blessings that we experience that shine G-d's light on us and illuminate our paths so that we can hear the sounds of Sinai. If we fail to see the G-dly light in the blessings, the curses of the past will have to break through our resistant exterior.

This then is what the Torah means when it talks about "listening to G-d's voice." This is the voice of Sinai that can now be felt and is what stirs us to do Teshuvah.

A Tighter Connection To Rosh Hashanah

We can now detect an even tighter connection between this week's parsha and Rosh Hashanah. Not only are they connected through the theme of Teshuvah, they are also linked by the notion of how jolting helps us obtain a clearer and crisper reception of the sounds of Sinai.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

This week's parsha speaks of how the pressures of exile, with its attendant curses, pierces through the resistant armor that blocks our ability to receive a clear signal from our soul. Likewise, according to Maimonides, the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is intended, among other objectives, to jolt us out of our reverie. Once we are awake and alert, we can then hear the daily sounds that emanate from Sinai. Moreover, we then connect with the sounding of the Shofar that accompanied the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, which is yet another objective of the Shofar of Rosh Hashanah.

We Are All Insiders

In order for these jolting forces to work, there is one proviso. We cannot imagine that we are Acher, an “another”, an outsider.

The apostate Elisha ben Avuya, cited earlier, could not return because he heard the heavenly voice declare, specifically, that everyone can return except for Acher. It did not say “except Elisha ben Avuyah, which was his proper name. He heard the voice exclaim Acher, the “other one.”

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

When a Jew, no matter how far he or she has strayed and desensitized himself or herself, recognizes that he or she is always an insider, he or she can certainly return.

Standing on the Bridge

As we stand on the bridge between two years we are reminded that we are now also situated on the bridge between the 2,000 year exile and the final Redemption through Moshiach. When we view all the negative things around us, we should exploit their power to awaken us to the reality of our situation. The sound of the Shofar that heralds the Messianic Age has already been sounded. This Rosh Hashanah, it is our role to hear and heed the call of the Shofar, not only as an echo of the past, but also as the sound of the future Redemption.

And may we all be inscribed and sealed for a good and sweet year, a year of visible good, including the ultimate good and blessing of the total revelation of Moshiach and the imminent final Redemption.

ESSAY SIX

NO MORE SECRETS

We are standing poised to enter into a new era of goodness and holiness.

We must do our part to make it happen as well as to prepare ourselves and the entire world for it. W

e don't have the luxury to be humble because that one additional Mitzvah that our influence will generate might be the one last act that is necessary to bring Moshiach, peace and goodness to the whole world.

Now, more than ever, we can't afford to withhold our gifts from the rest of our society.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY SIX

NO MORE SECRETS

What are the “Hidden Mattes?”

In this week’s parsha, Moses states:

“The hidden matters are for G-d our G-d, but the revealed matters are for us and our children forever, to fulfill all the words of this Torah.”

Commentators provide a host of explanations as to what Moses was referring to when he spoke of the “hidden” matters and the “revealed” matters.

Rashi explains that it is a response to the challenge some might pose to G-d. How can He hold all of us accountable for the private thoughts of an individual?

Moses thus declared that the hidden matters, the private indiscretions of some individuals, are not the responsibility of the community. These hidden affairs are between the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

perpetrator and G-d. The community, however, is responsible for the revealed matters. A society is obligated to ensure that justice is enacted. While a society is not expected to pry into everyone's private life to determine whether they have transgressed, they cannot sit back and mind their own collective business as injustice prevails.

Don't Always Hide You Virtue

Another approach to this verse refers to the tendency many good people have to hide their good deeds. They do not seek recognition and notoriety for their exemplary behavior. Their modesty is commendable and is consistent with the prophet's admonition: "you shall be modest with your G-d."

However, as noble, altruistic and holy this unassuming approach to doing good is, it also has a serious drawback. One who is a hidden tzadik cannot serve as a role model for others. One's children, neighbors and community do not know of the presence of this righteous person whose behavior they can and ought to emulate. The world is denied a major force and influence for the good.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

The Ba'al Shem Tov's Story

The Ba'al Shem Tov, before he founded, the Chassidic movement, was the head of a clandestine organization that catered to the material, emotional and spiritual needs of the Jewish community that suffered catastrophic losses in the aftermath of the terrible pogroms that plagued the 17th century. His mentor and predecessor encouraged him to become a public leader, after many years of hidden activity so that he could be more effective in rehabilitating and rejuvenating the Jewish community. But he demurred. In his modesty he wanted to serve G-d and his people with all his heart and soul, but he wanted to remain anonymous.

His mentor and predecessor, as the former leader of this “undercover” organization of kindness, sent him a message that ultimately prevailed on him to remove his cover.

In his message to the Ba'al Shem Tov he related a story of a saintly Jew who reached the highest levels of holiness. When his soul returned to his maker, all the angels couldn't sing enough of his praises, except for one. This angel argued that this man, as great and holy as he was, was not known to the rest of the world and therefore denied them the opportunity to bask in his light. The heavenly court decided that this noble and humble soul must descend once more to this world and become a leader

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

of his people, so that the entire world can benefit from his inspiration.

The Ba'al Shem Tov's predecessor concluded his narrative: "You are that soul. Your entire *raison d'être* is to become a public figure that will illuminate the world with the light of your soul and knowledge." And the rest is history.

This then is the meaning of the Torah's words: "The hidden matters are for G-d our G-d." When a person wants to operate behind the scenes; that is a noble and praiseworthy ambition, but its appeal is solely to G-d. Only G-d knows about this individual's secret deeds, but the world gets no direct benefit from him or her.

Thus, the Torah continues, "the revealed matters are for us and our children forever, to fulfill all the words of this Torah." When a person engages in good for all to behold, its effects are good for us, our children and our community because it inspires them and helps them to fulfill all the words of the Torah. Modesty where it impedes the progress of others is out of place.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

What Role is there for Modesty?

The question arises. If this is indeed true that the needs of others override modesty, why does the Torah advocate modesty in the first place?

There are three possible and equally valid answers to this question.

First, one can be a public figure and leader who shines and guides others and yet maintain modesty. People can realize that their qualities are gifts that they have an obligation to share with others. From this perspective there is no room for arrogance and condescension.

Second, the very fact that a humble individual goes against his or her nature to serve others is the ultimate test of modesty. To surrender that which is precious to oneself for the sake of G-d and others is the true test that one's humility is not just the acquisition of another virtue that actually can enhance one's ego. Feeling humble can actually be part of an ego trip.

Rather the genuine humble spirit is expressed by one who is willing to give away even their cherished spiritual possessions—such as the virtue of humility—for the benefit of others.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Misplaced Humility

And third, we are living in unique times when the need to help and inspire others is more pronounced.

As was stated on so many occasions, we are standing poised to enter into a new era of goodness and holiness. We must do our part to make it happen as well as to prepare ourselves and the entire world for it. We don't have the luxury to be humble because that one additional Mitzvah that our influence will generate might be the one last act that is necessary to bring Moshiach, peace and goodness to the whole world.

Now, more than ever, we can't afford to withhold our gifts from the rest of our society.

Hidden Good Exposed

Moreover, in the Biblical book of Daniel we are told that before the Messianic Age all matters will be revealed and all ambiguities will be clarified—all secrets will be divulged. This means that all of the hidden good will be exposed. And it is that good that will provide us with the power to vanquish all the hidden evil that is also surfacing. This is not a time to withdraw into one's own cocoon. It is the time to allow those positive energies that we all possess to

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

manifest themselves as a way of bringing about the Messianic Age, when all of G-d's "secrets" will also become revealed.

This message is particularly poignant as we stand on the threshold of the New Year. What we do in the remaining days, hours and moments of this year and the influence we have on others can make the New Year a year of goodness, sweetness and most importantly a year of Redemption.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY SEVEN

NO SECRETS

When leading a Torah life leads to a good physical life, it is a demonstration that there is no dissonance between the spiritual and the physical.

To bring about harmony between the physical and spiritual is indeed the very goal and objective of creation.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY SEVEN

NO SECRETS

Responsible for Others

In this week's parsha, Moses addresses the Jewish people in a rather cryptic fashion that has engendered many diverse interpretations (See also preceding essay.):

Moses exhorts the Jewish people who are to enter the Promised Land and who have just entered into a covenant with G-d:

“The hidden things are for G-d, our G-d, but the revealed things are for us and for our children forever, to fulfill all the words of this Torah.”

What did Moses mean when he referred to the “hidden” and “revealed” things?”

According to Rashi, whose commentary is dedicated to the *p'shat*, or straightforward, simple meaning of the text, Moses' words related to the covenant G-d made with the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Jewish people that imposed responsibility and liability of the actions of one Jew for all others. This imposition of responsibility for the sins of others raises a question. What are we to do when a person sins in his or her heart and harbors an idolatrous thought? How can we be held responsible for what someone might think or feel? What hope is there for us if we are held accountable for even an individual who has harbored evil thoughts?

In response to these questions, Moses says: “The hidden things in a person’s mind are indeed for G-d our G-d, (to deal with privately), but the revealed things (where people’s sins are known) are for us and for our children forever (to deal with, and enact justice), to fulfill all the words of this Torah.”

In other words, while we are indeed responsible for each other’s behavior; we are not responsible for what others think and feel. That is between them and G-d.

Where’s the Real Reward?

According to the Alshich, a sixteenth century Biblical commentator, explains that in this verse Moses responds to a basic question as to why the Torah only mentions reward and punishment in this world and not the reward and punishment for the soul in the afterlife.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

The answer conveyed by the aforementioned verse is: “These rewards are hidden and only G-d can know them. By contrast, the physical rewards and punishments are revealed to us and our children.” They are therefore more effective as motivators since they are clearly visible and knowable to all.

Intellect and Emotion versus Action

Chassidic thought adds another dimension to the Torah’s description of the “hidden” and the “revealed.” It explains that the “hidden” refers to the intellect and emotions that underlie all of our physical or “revealed” activities.

And here the question arises as to which of these areas of expression is more important? Is it more important to think and feel like a Jew? Or, perhaps, is G-d more interested in the way we behave?

Our original verse—“The hidden things are for G-d, our G-d, but the revealed things are for us and for our children forever, to fulfill all the words of this Torah”—addresses this very issue.

Yes, indeed, the “hidden things”, i.e., the inner faculties of the soul are more spiritual and G-dly, but the ultimate goal of creation is to make a dwelling place for G-d within the

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

physical world by performing actions that are revealed to all.

Undermining

This sheds light as to why we are responsible for each other's actions (Rashi's "simple" explanation). Since we are all charged with the same mission of transforming this world into a dwelling for G-d through our actions, a lack of spiritual awareness of one individual does not impact so strongly the well-being of others. Even if one is totally devoid of any understanding and feeling for G-d, that will only affect that individual's personal relationship with G-d. It will not significantly undermine society's collective effort in making the world a hospitable place for G-d. It does not frustrate G-d's plan for creation as long as our actions are intact.

Thus we are held responsible for each other's actions, because one individual's actions could undermine the general purpose of creation that affects everyone.

Why does the Torah Dwell on Physical Rewards?

This approach also illuminates the explanation of the Alshich that the verse addresses the fact that all rewards

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

mentioned in the Torah are physical. The reason the Torah discusses the physical rewards and punishments and not the spiritual ones is because, in truth, they are not rewards in the strict sense of the word. They are the direct consequences of our actions that attest to their viability. The reward in this world is a barometer of the efficacy of our actions; that they truly have an impact on the world.

When leading a Torah life leads to a good physical life, it is a demonstration that there is no dissonance between the spiritual and the physical. And to bring about harmony between the physical and spiritual is indeed the very goal and objective of creation. The spiritual rewards, by contrast, are not visible within the realm of the physical world, and they, therefore, do not relate as closely to our mission to transform the physical realm.

This objective to bring peace between the spiritual and physical that is accomplished primarily by adherence to the practical commandments will be fully realized with the coming of Moshiach.

At that time we will see all negative divisions and barriers disappear and true peace will reign in all of the areas that have eluded us in the past. The means to achieving this goal is through our commitment to the down-to-earth Torah directives that are revealed for all to see. By

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

following the revealed we will ultimately witness unfolding of the heretofore hidden dimensions of G-dly light.

ESSAY EIGHT

ULTIMATE LIFE AND GOODNESS

We live in a paradoxical age.

We stand on the cusp of the Messianic Age, which will usher in a new dimension of and appreciation for life. At the same time, the very institution of life has never before been more simultaneously pronounced, challenged and undermined.

While medical technology has made the most incredible advances in saving and prolonging life, society has experienced its utter devaluation.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY EIGHT

ULTIMATE LIFE AND GOODNESS

End of Year Message

In this, the last parsha we will read before reaching the New Year, 5775, Moses exhorts the Jewish people:

“See, I have set before you this day, life and good, and death and evil.”

The Hebrew text suggests a question here that deserves our consideration. The word *es* is repeated with each of these four key words. In line with Rashi’s commentary on an earlier verse, the word *es*, which is usually left untranslated in English, actually means “with.” For example, the very first verse of the Torah states, “In the beginning G-d created heaven and earth.” The original text appends the word *es* to both heaven and earth. This prompted Rashi to explain that the Torah actually states “In the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

beginning G-d created subsidiary creations with the earth and all the hosts of the heaven **with** the heaven.”

In light of the interpretation of *es* as “with,” we must try to understand the significance of the Torah’s use of that word in conjunction with “life” “good” “death” and “evil.” The Torah is not just referring to “life, good, death and evil” in their own right but also to their ancillary components. What does this mean and what are they? And why was Moses so emphatic that we see these secondary characteristics?

To better understand these auxiliary aspects and how they apply to us, we must first seek a fuller understanding of the original concepts of life, good, death and evil.

The Wonders of *Life*

We live in a paradoxical age. We stand on the cusp of the Messianic Age, which will usher in a new dimension of and appreciation for life. At the same time, the very institution of life has never before been more simultaneously pronounced, challenged and undermined. While medical technology has made the most incredible advances in saving and prolonging life, society has experienced its utter devaluation.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

One illustration of this phenomenon can be seen in the fact that, not so long ago, the greatest blessing one could give another was to live to 120. Today many people shudder at the prospect of living that long.

The reason for this phenomenon is our proximity to the Messianic Age, when life will reach its zenith—eternal life! One of the 13 Principles of Faith articulated by Maimonides, based on the Torah's explicit statements, is belief in the Resurrection of the Dead after the onset of the Messianic Age. The prophet Isaiah declared of that moment: "He will swallow up death forever; and the L-rd G-d will wipe away tears from off all faces."(25:8)

Since G-d, in His infinite kindness, does not want to shock or overwhelm us, He has given us a taste of these future changes. We are therefore witness to new technologies, such as cloning, the growing medical use of stem cells, etc., to demonstrate that the world is about to experience an explosion of life.

However, we are still in the period of Galus. The forces of darkness have yet to be vanquished and all positive phenomena are countered by a backlash of parallel negative energy. The explosion and proliferation of life that we now witness is therefore met with an irrational assault on life at both ends of the life-spectrum.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Many have pointed out the irony of a hospital spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to save the life of a preemie in one room, while destroying another preemie elsewhere in the same hospital.

Economic considerations and the slippery issue of “quality of life” have, among other reasons, dramatically changed the secular attitude toward the remaining value of human life at its end.

Judaism has always viewed life as possessing an intrinsic value. Each life is an expression of the Divine presence in our world. Who knows what value a life has, even one that appears unable to contribute to society? In Judaism, next to G-d, the Source of all life, life itself is the most sacred of institutions.

How can we dispel the notion that life itself is not valued when we lack financial resources and are living with an apparently degraded quality of life? Our Sages (Talmud, Ta’anis 8b) showed us the way when they declared: “The One who gives life, gives sustenance.”

We can now understand why the Torah adds the preposition *es* to the word for life. Not only does G-d give us life in its raw and unembellished state, ; G-d also gives us all the appurtenances to life.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Eternal Life versus Temporal Life

We can understand the difference between life and the accessories to life on another level. True life is eternal life. When G-d created Adam and Eve He intended them to live forever. It was only after they partook of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge that death entered into the world. Thus life in its original state is eternal life. However, even the lesser temporal life we experience today is inherently valuable. Thus the *es* or the temporal aspect of life is also a Divine gift to prepare us for the eternal life of the future. By introducing the enduring values of Torah, life today also enjoys the status of true life.

An illustration of this point can be found in the laws about saving lives on Shabbos. According to the Talmud, saving a life overrides the Shabbos restrictions even if the person in peril has only a few more hours to live. One may properly violate the Shabbos prohibitions even for the secondary aspects — the “*es*”—of life.

Intrinsic and Relative *Good*

There is intrinsic good and there is relative good. Since the sin of Adam and Eve all good contains an element of evil. In the Messianic Age, however, the evil will be expelled and good will be restored to its original unadulterated state.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

One might be tempted to discount the value of the necessarily adulterated good we do now. To dispel any notion that the good we can do today is not worthwhile, our Sages tell us, “one should always engage in doing good even if it is for ulterior motives.” The rationale for this is: “from within the ulterior motive one will eventually do it for the pure motive.”

Chassidic thought explains that this point of view is not just a concession to our weaknesses and baser instincts. It is also not tolerated because of the rationale that “the end (of doing it altruistically) justifies the means (doing good for selfish reasons).” Rather, even the compromised good of today is intrinsically worthwhile. As Chassidus emphasizes by using the word “**within**,” the ulterior motive cloaks a fundamentally positive motive. Deep down, the person is motivated by a pure and holy desire to do unmitigated good. It just takes time and effort to allow that inner purity and good to rise to the surface and dominate the shallow ulterior motives.

This now explains why the Torah adds the word *es* with respect to the term “good.” It is to disabuse the idea that true good is elusive. Even now we can latch on to the auxiliary level of good (“*es*”) because it carries the seeds of genuine good within it and is the catalyst to bring about the ultimate good of the future.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Virtual *Death*

Death can also be understood as existing on two planes. To cite a few examples: The Talmud and Zohar both state that sleep is one-sixtieth of death. The heel is referred to as the “Angel of Death” of our body because of its very limited amount of life. According to the Zohar, when one has “fallen” from his spiritual level it is as though he had died. According to the Talmud, a poor person is considered to be like a dead person. The simple understanding of this radical statement is to impress upon us the urgency in helping the poor; it is as if we brought him back to life. These are all ancillary or virtual forms of death.

To dispel the notion that the comparison of all of the above to death is sheer hyperbole, the Torah adds the preposition *es*, strongly suggesting that even the “virtual” forms of death derive from the same source.

Thus, when we awaken every morning and recite the Modeh Ani, in which we thank G-d for bringing us back to life, we are reminded of the Resurrection of the Dead. However, it is not just a remote reminder. This daily revival carries the seeds of, introduces us to and prepares us for that ultimate revival.

Similarly, when we help a “virtually dead” destitute person, we should not dismiss the comparison to bringing someone

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

back from the dead. By adding the word *es* to the word death, the Torah instructs us that when we help the destitute it is tantamount to actually bringing them back to life.

Evil and its Handles

Our Sages declared in Ethics of the Fathers: “Reflect on three things and you will not come to the handles of sin.” It does not say “and you will not sin” but “you will not come to the **handles** of sin.” What is the difference?

The Rebbe explains that the desire for sin can be preceded by the desire and passion for permissible things. However, once a person is driven by desire he or she can easily slide down a slippery slope into forbidden territory.

The Rebbe then interprets the words “reflect on **three** things” as a reference to the third and final Redemption and the rebuilding of the third Bais Hamikdash. In that era, material delights will be as abundant (and therefore as meaningless) as the dust of the earth. Knowing this will distract us from the pursuit of and obsession with material pleasures—the “handles” of sin.

Thus when the Torah attaches the word *es* to evil it intimates that we should not only avoid actual evil, but also

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

anticipate our future Messianic Age mindset and desist from the preoccupation with material things that can facilitate a slide into sin.

As we stand on the threshold of a New Year and of the imminent Redemption we should focus our attention on cultivating life and goodness in all of their forms no matter how they may pale compared to the life and good of the future. Similarly, we must remove all forms of death and evil in preparation for the future, when only unmitigated life and goodness will endure.

May we all be inscribed and sealed for a good and sweet New Year; a year, too, of total Redemption.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY NINE

IT'S NOT IN HEAVEN

Had G-d given us the Torah the way the angels would have wanted it, we would have had to become like angels. Our Torah would be a strictly cerebral exercise. It would have been geared to the soul and would not have anything to do with the body.

If this is what G-d wanted of us we would have to do it.

But, that was not what G-d asked of us.

He gave the Torah to us humans because He wanted the Torah to have a human touch. He wanted it to relate to our reality. He wanted us to use the Torah to change the physical world by harnessing it to serve G-d.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY NINE

IT'S NOT IN HEAVEN

Traveling to the Heavens

The Torah, in this week's parsha, describes the accessibility of Torah and its commandments.

"This commandment that I am commanding you today is not elusive or remote from you. It is not in heaven that you should say, 'Who shall go up to heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it.'"

Rashi comments:

"If it was in heaven, you would have been compelled to arise there and learn it."

What exactly does Rashi mean? How are we to travel to the heavens to receive the Torah?

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Torah on Two Levels

One way of understanding this matter is to realize that the Torah has two dimensions. There are the actual commandments that address the world the way we know it. It relates to the physical existence that is part of our experience as humans. It teaches us how to live our lives on a daily basis.

But then there is another dimension of Torah. Torah can also be understood on a completely spiritual level. The commandments can be understood to be metaphors that relate to spiritual concepts.

Angel's Protest

Indeed, the Talmud relates that when Moses went up to Mount Sinai to retrieve the Tablets containing the Ten Commandments, the angels protested to G-d that He should keep the Torah in the heavens.

Of what use was the Torah to angels who are spiritual beings. And that was precisely what Moses told them that the Torah requires a body and a physical world.

The Torah addresses people who went through the crucible of Egyptian bondage, Moses argued to the angels. The Torah was given to people who are born to a physical

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

father and mother. The Torah was given to people who might harbor a desire to murder, steal or commit adultery. The Torah, Moses argued had no relevance to angels.

What then did the angels have in mind when they asked for the Torah?

The answer is they wanted a Torah the way it can be understood in a totally spiritual fashion. They wanted a Torah that did not need a physical body, but that could nurture the soul. They wanted a Torah that a disembodied spiritual entity could relate to.

Had G-d given us the Torah the way the angels would have wanted it, we would have had to become like angels. Our Torah would be a strictly cerebral exercise. It would have been geared to the soul and would not have anything to do with the body. If the Torah was in heaven, we would have to become ascetics. We would have to fast continually, deny the body and be celibate. We would have to engage in prayer all day and study Torah all night. We would not have a social life and a worldly existence. There would be no commerce for us and a minimal physical existence.

If this is what G-d wanted of us we would have to do it.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Torah for Humans Only

But, that was not what G-d asked of us. He gave the Torah to us humans because He wanted the Torah to have a human touch. He wanted it to relate to our reality. He wanted us to use the Torah to change the physical world by harnessing it to serve G-d. He wanted us to get married, eat and drink and be physically productive individuals.

But the question now arises. If G-d never wanted us to reach the heavens, why is it even mentioned in the Torah as a possibility. Why does the Torah imply, as Rashi claims, that if the Torah was given to us in the heavens we would have to go there?

Climbing to the Heavens with our Feet on the Ground

The answer is that the mere suggestion that G-d would have wanted us to go to the heavens, though overruled by Him, is instructive.

The fact that G-d rejected the notion is not to say that there was no merit in that idea. Indeed, there is much merit to the idea that Torah is a spiritual discipline whose goal it is to rise above the physical plane of existence. It is just that that dimension of Torah cannot exist in solitude; it must be integrated within the dimension of Torah as it

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

relates to the physical. And that is what makes it accessible to us.

Escape Times

There must be times when we desire to escape the mundane. And Judaism designates specific times for that. Shabbos is a day when we divorce ourselves from our work and other material pursuits.

On a daily basis we have the prayers and times allotted for Torah study, when the concerns of life are no longer in the fore of our consciousness.

Yes, there are times when we have to wax spiritual and look for the mystical side of the Torah. But all these spiritual pursuits and "escapes" are only legitimate when we know how to come back down on earth and invest the spiritual experience into our physical lives.

Will things Change in the Future?

A time will come, however, when we will reach greater spiritual heights in our approach to Torah. In the Messianic Age, we will be taught Torah from Moshiach. Moshiach's innovative approach to Torah study is that he will show us how all of the conventional teachings of Torah are

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

reflections of profound G-dly concepts. New vistas of Torah knowledge will be opened for us.

But even in the Messianic Age, we will still have to live our lives in the manner prescribed by the Torah, in the most physical and literal way. We will still rest on the Shabbos, eat kosher, put on Tefillin, the way we do today.

The difference will be that we will also see the deeper, mystical meaning to all of our observances.

Moreover, the Kabbalists tell us, we will know how to practice our Judaism by seeing the deeper spiritual side. Whereas today we first must know the simple practical meaning of the Torah text, and from there we can probe deeper within the text to discover its esoteric meaning, in the days of Moshiach, the process will be reversed. We will derive the practical meaning and application of the Torah from first understanding, or seeing, its spiritual, "heavenly" dimension.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY TEN

DIGGING FOR THE ROOTS WITH THE SHOFAR

There is a unique characteristic associated with thought:

While thought is merely a “garment” of the soul, it is nevertheless a garment that can’t be shed unlike speech and action.

It is an autonomous process and it points to the way the thoughts of a person are more intimately connected to the person’s soul than speech and action. .

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY TEN

DIGGING FOR THE ROOTS WITH THE SHOFAR

Connection!

The Parsha Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbos before Rosh Hashanah.

Rabbi Isaac Halevi Hurvitz (1558-1628 known as the Shaloh, the acronym of the title of his magnum opus) established the premise that all Torah portions are connected to the times in which they are read.

Accordingly, we must ponder the connection between the parsha of Nitzavim and Rosh Hashanah.

There are at least two connections:

The first is found in the very first verse:

“You are standing firmly **today**, all of you together before G-d your G-d...”

According to the Zohar, the word “today” in this context refers to Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

The Torah is thus saying that we should be confident that we will stand firmly before G-d and receive a victorious judgment on this day.

A second connection is in the verse that states:

“Perhaps among you there is a person (growing in wickedness like) a root that is sprouting (bitter herbs, like) hemlock and wormwood...”

Commentators have observed that the initials of the four Hebrew words *shoresh*, *parah*, *rosh*, *v'la'annah* (root, sprouting, hemlock and wormwood) form the word Shofar. This conveys the message that the sounding of the Shofar can help even one who has sunk so low that he has become like a poisonous and bitter root.

We can find another connection to Rosh Hashanah in these four words. All the letters of Rosh Hashanah itself are contained here. Hence this phrase discusses both the day of Rosh Hashanah and the Mitzvah associated with this day, which is sounding the Shofar.

These two allusions to Rosh Hashanah nicely complement each other. How does one become confident that he will stand firm and be victorious on Rosh Hashanah? The answer is in the second hint; it is through the sounding of the Shofar.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

We must however try to understand why the Mitzvah of Shofar is hinted specifically in the words that discuss a poisonous **root**. There must be an even deeper message in the Torah's reference to evil as a root.

When we read further in the text, the Torah is quite harsh in its response to this person who is like an evil root and states that G-d will not forgive him and he will be obliterated and all of the curses mentioned in the preceding parsha shall befall him.

It may be inferred from this line of reasoning that the root of evil is far more problematic than the fruit of evil. What is the rationale for this? What precisely is the root of evil and how is it ameliorated by the Shofar?

The Soul and its Garments

One way of interpreting the root of evil is by considering the role of thought as opposed to speech and action.

On one level evil thoughts are not sins, unlike speaking and doing evil.

However, there is one aspect of thought that is indeed a more serious and egregious sin than actual performance of a transgression.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

To understand this we have to recall the Tanya's division of the human personality into two strata. First we have our personalities, which include our intellect and emotion. Second, we have the "garments" of the soul, i.e., thought, speech or action. They, like garments, express the contours of our personality; thought, speech and action are the concrete manifestations of our soul.

The Power of Thought

But there is a fundamental difference between thought and speech and action. Speech, and to a greater extent action, are external phenomena; they project our personalities outward, whereas thought is an internal expression of our feelings and ideas to ourselves.

There is another unique characteristic associated with thought: While thought is not synonymous with the soul itself, being merely a "garment" of the soul, it is nevertheless a garment that can't be shed unlike speech and action. One could cease acting and stop talking at will but one cannot cease thinking. It is an autonomous process and it points to the way the thoughts of a person are more intimately connected to the person's soul than speech and action. While we can easily remove our clothing, we cannot remove our skin which is, in some ways, like a

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

garment which covers our blood vessels and internal organs.

This explains why the Alter Rebbe states in Tanya that harboring negative thoughts of another is worse than speaking those negative thoughts aloud.

Taken at face value this assertion appears to conflict with a basic principle of Jewish law, mentioned earlier, that G-d does not punish a person for sins committed in the realm of thought. Moreover, when the Torah states the prohibition against Lashon Hara-evil tongue or slander it makes it clear that it means speaking evil, not thinking evil. Indeed, the Talmudic and colloquial expression Lashon Hara, literally means the “evil **tongue**.” How then could the Alter Rebbe state that thinking ill of others is worse than speaking ill?

The answer lies in the distinction between what we do to harm others and what we do to harm ourselves.

When we act or speak wrongly it has an impact on the world outside of us because these “garments” are directed outwards. The damage they do us should not be discounted, but the primary harm is done to those who are affected by our actions and speech. According to the Ba’al Shem Tov, the evil tongue harms the person who has been slandered not just because his reputation has been sullied

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

but also because the spoken word has the power to actualize hidden evil. The one slandered may have kept his vices under control, but when the gossip vocalizes the victim's faults it causes these faults to be magnified and exposed.

However, the garment of thought has the inverse effect. While it cannot wreak as much havoc on others because it is hidden, thought has a much greater damaging effect on the person who knowingly and intentionally harbors those negative thoughts.

The reason for this is that since thought is so close to the soul itself, when the garment of thought is of a destructive nature it chafes the soul that is so tightly enveloped by that garment.

We can now see why the Torah ascribes greater harm to the root of evil than to evil itself. The root of evil, as explained, refers to the negative thoughts we may harbor. While it is relatively easy to correct our actions and words, it is extremely difficult to change our corrupted thought patterns. They are far more damaging to our souls and therefore require a much more intense form of repentance.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

A Greater Challenge

If thought is the root of speech and action, then the faculties of intellect and emotion are the root of thought. It follows then, that if one's intellect and emotions are corrupted it is even more damaging. Thus, if our minds and emotions are warped then it is even more challenging to correct them because these are characteristics that define us even more than thought. They are inseparable parts of who we are and are at the root of all that we do.

In truth there are even deeper levels of the soul which are far more intrinsic to who we are and are at the root of our faculties. And when these internal “root” levels of the soul are corrupted it can be an almost insurmountable challenge to expunge that insidious evil.

Shofar Gets to the Root

We can now understand why the Torah alludes to the Shofar of Rosh Hashanah precisely in the section of the Torah that discusses the poisonous roots of evil.

By linking the Shofar to poisonous roots, the Torah is actually telling us what is needed to expunge the most insidious root forms of evil. Conventional methods fall short of accomplishing that because they only deal with the

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

surface of one's personality or possibly hidden dimensions that are close to the surface. The sound of the Shofar represents the primal cry that emanates from the deepest and most hidden parts of our souls. It is the very source (*shoresh* in Hebrew) and root of our entire being. The Shofar is the excavator that digs deeply into our psyche, reaches the core and then corrects it, polishes it and transforms it. Thus the word Shofar also is connected to the root (no pun intended) of the word that means to beautify and embellish.

The Great Paradox and the Great Shofar!

The above applies to the Great Shofar that the prophets speak of concerning the Messianic Age. Indeed, one of the reasons for the sounding of Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is to invoke that Great Shofar.

Throughout history we have, for better or worse, dealt with the most glaring and obvious faults, both collectively and individually. The most entrenched forms of evil—the root evil—however, was left for the end.

This may explain why in recent times we've been exposed to the greatest good and the greatest evil. It was not too long ago that we went through the Holocaust. Even today there are millions of people who want to visit death and

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

pain on virtually all those who don't follow their belief system. Yet, notwithstanding all this worldly evil, we have also experienced the greatest good in history, from scientific and medical breakthroughs to the religious freedom we enjoy throughout the world.

How do we account for this paradox?

One possible answer to this question is that all of the cumulative good of the past has dealt a blow to the more surface forms of evil, while the deepest source and root of evil has not been touched, enabling it to rear its ugly head in a last ditch attempt to wreak havoc on the world.

A Root for a Root!

It is therefore the Great Shofar that G-d sounds in the moments leading to the Final Redemption that reaches into and uproots the evil and deals it a fatal blow.

Our role in this process is to hear the sound of the Rosh Hashanah shofar, the micro version of G-d's Great Shofar, while searching deeply into our souls to find the essential G-dly spark that lies at their cores. This will vanquish the root and core of evil; a root for a root.

We will then certainly stand firmly before G-d our G-d and we will be inscribed and sealed by Him with a good and

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

sweet year; and most importantly, we will be blessed with a year of genuine and complete Redemption by our righteous Moshiach!

ESSAY ELEVEN

THE YEAR OF TESHUAH- SALVATION

As the national election season heats up, we have to remember that our salvation does not come from an elected official, no matter how human, noble and charismatic he may be.

We should not rely on a king or others in power who themselves are merely pawns in the hands of G-d.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY ELEVEN

THE YEAR OF TESHUAH-SALVATION

The Unique Year

This week's parsha begins with the words "You are standing firmly today, all of you together, before G-d your G-d..."

This parsha is always read the Shabbos before Rosh Hashanah. According to the Ba'al Shem Tov, this is hinted in the word "today," which our Sages state alludes to the day of Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment. These words are intended to instill within us the confidence that we will stand firm and victorious on this day.

This is true every year, but we may suggest that it is particularly true this year. With but a cursory glance at this new year's date, 5776, we can discover a special connection to the theme of how we are confident that we will win our case and bring salvation to ourselves and to the entire world.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

In Hebrew every number is also a letter and every letter a number, This New Year will be the year 5776. It is designated by the following letters: *Hei* (5,000) *tav* (400), *shin* (300), *ayin* (70) *vav* (6) = 5776. The Hebrew letters that make up this number form the word *Teshuah*, the literal meaning of which is “salvation.” (Not to be confused with another word appropriate with this time of the year, *Teshuvah*, which means repentance or return.)

Tipping the Scales for *Teshuah*

When Maimonides (Hilchos Teshuvah 3:4) speaks of judgment on Rosh Hashanah he cites the Talmudic statement (*Kiddushin* 40b) that we should look at our tally sheet of our virtues and vices and view them as evenly balanced. Similarly, we should look at the entire world as evenly balanced between virtue and vice. A single Mitzvah can tip the scales for our merits and the merits of the entire world. Maimonides, however, adds the following words: “and causes *teshuah*-salvation and *hatzalah*-deliverance for oneself and the entire world.”

The word *Teshuah* is closely related to the word and theme of *Nitzavim*; standing firmly and confidently. With the realization that all it takes is one additional Mitzvah to bring *Teshuah*-salvation to oneself and the world, the

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

highlight of this year, we can indeed stand firm and be confident that we will merit salvation.

Four Roots

What precisely is the meaning of *Teshuah*?

The Tzemach Tzedek (the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose 226th birthday we will be observing the day before Rosh Hashanah, one of the most prolific writers in all of history who is known by the name of his classic work on Talmud and Jewish law), states that this word has four roots:

The first is “salvation.”

The second is “crying out” for salvation.

The third is “turning,” as in the phrase “turning your attention to someone.” This usage can be found in the verse, “G-d turned [*vayisha*] to Abel and to his offering.” In other words, G-d turned His attention to Abel and accepted his offering.

The fourth is “delight” or “joy,” as when the book of Proverbs (8:30) describes the Torah, allegorically, as G-d’s delight and plaything.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

As we are poised to enter the New Year of Teshuah and stand on the threshold of the ultimate Teshuah, let us reflect on these four dimensions.

First Dimension: We Are In G-d's Hands Exclusively

The first dimension is salvation. The Psalmists (146:3) states: “Do not rely on nobles, nor on a human being who holds no *Teshuah*-salvation.”

The lesson of this dimension is abundantly clear and particularly relevant to this day and age. As the national election season heats up, we have to remember that our salvation does not come from an elected official, no matter how human, noble and charismatic he may be. One medieval commentator, the Radak, writes that this verse teaches us that we should not rely on a king or others in power who themselves are merely pawns in the hands of G-d.

This prompts us to ask an important question. Mortal men can be influenced to treat us well and to give us some measure of earthly salvation. But if G-d is in total control of their actions as leaders how do we change things? What

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

influence do we have over our future? What can we do to have G-d bring *Teshuah*-salvation?

Second Dimension: Plead and Demand!

The answer is provided in the next dimension of *Teshuah*, which means crying out. G-d waits for us to be pro-active in the process of Redemption. First and foremost, He wants us to cry out to Him and ask, and even demand, that He redeem us from exile and bring about the Age of Peace and G-dly revelation that He has promised. It is not blasphemous or sacrilegious for us to demand this of G-d because that is precisely what G-d demands of us.

Moreover, indifference to and acceptance of exile, with its attendant concealment of G-d and rampant evil, is the very opposite of showing respect for G-d. If one's father is being disrespected and enduring pain and misery, which child will not do something to remove that source of pain and anguish? The Prophet Yechezkal describes exile as a desecration of G-d's name. Our Sages emphasize that G-d "suffers" with us in exile and He too asks to be redeemed.

The least we can do is express our displeasure for this state of affairs and cry out to G-d to change it.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Moreover, by crying out to G-d to bring an end to exile we demonstrate two things. The first is that we have profound faith in G-d. Otherwise, why would we turn to Him? Turning to G-d is the most dramatic way of demonstrating our belief in Him and in His ability to totally transform the world.

Second, when we cry out to G-d we demonstrate that we are sensitive children. We express our sensitivity to G-d's pain as well as the pain of all those in the world who suffer because G-d's presence has not penetrated the psyche of all people. When G-d is concealed people are prone to commit ungodly actions. Crying out to G-d demonstrates that we are not callous. This, the idea of crying out, is the second root of the word *Teshuah*.

Third Dimension: Make a Right Turn!

Once we have cried out to G-d, He rightly asks us what we have done to change the balance of the world. What, He asks, have you done to turn away from the status-quo and preoccupation with your own interests? When will you do something to remove the obstructive nature of the world that doesn't allow My light to penetrate every corner? And, when will you turn in My direction and pay attention to My interests? These firm responses reflect the third nuance

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

of the word *Teshuah*, which connotes turning our attention from one area to another. Here too we turn our attention from our own selfish interests to think about G-d's interests.

Fourth Dimension: Live with the Delight of Redemption Now!

The final step in this process is not to wait for G-d to answer us with His *Teshuah*, but start living a life of G-dly delight and joy; this is the fourth dimension of the word *Teshuah*. When G-d sees our commitment to living in a redemptive manner, He will remove the veil that covers up the reality that this world is a place of utter G-dly delight. Let's not wait for G-d to remove the veil. Let's move it by treating ourselves to the greatest of delights: Torah study, particularly with emphasis on the mystical teachings which are characterized as the ultimate delights of Torah.

Four Stages of the Messianic Process

These four roots of the word *Teshuah* also reflect the four stages of the Messianic process.

Maimonides (*Hilchos Melachim*, Chapter 11) describes Moshiach's efforts at fighting and defeating the enemies

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

that surround us. This parallels the idea of a salvation when we are saved from those who attempt to destroy us or undermine our ability to live a fully Torah oriented life.

The next step, Maimonides continues, will be for Moshiach to build the Bais Hamikdash, the place where all of our prayers are directed. It is the ultimate place for and experience of prayer. Only we will no longer cry out because we are suffering, but we will call to G-d in prayer and express our deepest and most heartfelt feelings of yearning to get closer to G-d. This is alluded to in the translation of *Teshuah* as a form of prayer.

This stage will be followed by Moshiach **turning** (the third meaning of *Teshuah*) to the nations of the world, as the prophet Tzeephania declares: “For then will I **turn** to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the L-rd to serve Him with one consent.” From Moshiach’s efforts to redeem the Jewish people, he (with G-d’s direction exclusively) will turn to the rest of humanity and bring them to serve G-d.

The final step in the Messianic drama will be the introduction of the greatest spiritual delights, relative to which all material pleasure will be as naught. This parallels the fourth root of the word *Teshuah*, which is delight and joy.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

May all of you, among all of Israel, be inscribed and sealed for a good year; a good and sweet year. A year of *Teshuah* in all respects and in all dimensions, with the imminent arrival of Moshiach, who will usher in the true and complete Redemption.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY TWELVE

THE SEVEN STEPS OF CLOSENESS

The Alter Rebbe took the core ideas of the Ba'al Shem Tov and transposed them into a systematic philosophical system that fused mysticism with rationalism.

This synthesis enables the average person to access the heretofore esoteric domain of Jewish mysticism.

If we had to find one word that would describe the Alter Rebbe's contribution to the process of Moshiach, that word would be "*karov*-near."

Absorbing these mystical ideas solely through one's emotions, without understanding, does not get one closer to spiritual growth because feelings are ephemeral and may easily dissipate.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY TWELVE

THE SEVEN STEPS OF CLOSENESS

Moshiach a Mitzvah?

One of the most frequently cited verses in the Torah is: “For this thing is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.”

The words “this thing” refers back to an earlier verse that speaks of “this Mitzvah.”

According to Nachmanides “this Mitzvah” refers in turn either to the totality of Judaism, or more specifically to the Mitzvah of Teshuvah-repentance.

However, from the words of the Midrash it seems that it also refers to the coming of Moshiach. The Midrash contrasts the heathen prophet Bilam’s words about Moshiach, “I see **him** but not now,” with Moses’ statement, “For **this thing** is very near.” Bilam’s intent was to place Moshiach as far distant as possible while Moses was asserting that his coming is near.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

How do we reconcile the Torah's use of the word *Mitzvah*, which means commandment, with *Moshiach*, which is about a person who will usher in the Messianic Age?

One answer is that it will be the Messianic Age when we will perform all of the *Mitzvos* in the most complete and ideal manner. According to Maimonides, *Moshiach's* primary function will be to restore the integrity of Torah and all of its commandments. Quantitatively, the hundreds of *Mitzvos* we cannot presently observe, because we lack the Temple and suffer from other conditions associated with *Galus*, will be restored. Qualitatively, we will perform all of the *Mitzvos* with the greatest understanding, dedication, feeling, love and awe.

The Seven Words: Seven Generations

It may also be suggested that this verse, which contains seven words (besides the conjunctive *ki-for*), presents us with a description of seven stages of preparing for *Moshiach*. It may further be posited that these seven stages parallel the contributions of the seven leaders of Chabad, who dedicated their lives to bring *Moshiach*, and to bring him closer.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement, (whose birthday we just observed on the 18th

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

of Elul), related in a letter that his soul once experienced a state of spiritual elevation so profound that he was able to enter the spiritual “residence” of the soul of Moshiach. The Ba’al Shem Tov asked when he would come. Moshiach replied, “When your fountains will be dispersed to the far reaches of the world.” This was taken to mean that Moshiach’s arrival hinged on the widespread dissemination of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s spiritual teachings, which focus on G-d’s presence in our world.

This process of making these mystical-philosophical teachings, known as Chassidus, accessible to the entire world began in earnest with Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad Chassidic movement (and whose birthday we just observed on the 18th of Elul, the same as the Ba’al Shem Tov!).

Karov-Near!

The Alter Rebbe, as he was called, took the core ideas of the Ba’al Shen Tov and transposed them into a systematic philosophical system that fused mysticism with rationalism. This synthesis enables the average person to access the heretofore esoteric domain of Jewish mysticism.

If we had to find one word that would describe the Alter Rebbe’s contribution to the process of Moshiach, that word

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

would be “*karov*-near.” Absorbing these mystical ideas solely through one’s emotions, without understanding, does not get one closer to spiritual growth because feelings are ephemeral and may easily dissipate.

The Alter Rebbe thus states on the title page of his classic work, the Tanya, that his work is based on the verse, “For this thing is very **near** to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.” The Alter Rebbe then states that his work was intended to clarify just how close it is.

In Chassidic tradition, the Alter Rebbe is known as the personification of the intellectual attribute of *chochma*, which is the first step in an intellectual process.

The Alter Rebbe was thus the first step in getting the inner dimension of Judaism accessible to us and this was the first step in bringing us closer to Moshiach.

Ei’lecha-to You

The Alter Rebbe was succeeded by his son, Rabbi Dovber, known as the Mitteler Rebbe. He is identified with the second intellectual faculty, *binah*, the power of elucidation. In his voluminous works, Rabbi Dovber fleshed out his father’s seminal ideas. With the ideas of the Tanya are fully developed, they can be more easily internalized. Over the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

course of this process we can expect the emergence of powerful emotions that will draw us even closer to our spiritual goal.

The Mittler Rebbe's contribution can therefore be summed up by the next word in the verse, which is *ei'lecha-to* you; he allowed these teachings to be fully absorbed and internalized within us.

HaDavar-This Thing-Word

The next level and contribution was personified by the Mittler Rebbe's successor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel (son-in-law of the Mittler Rebbe and grandson of the Alter Rebbe), who is known by the name of his magnum opus, Tzemach Tzedek.

The third word of our verse, *ha'davar*, translated as "this thing," also means "this word." The Tzemach Tzedek was arguably the most prolific writer in all of Jewish history. He is reputed to have written 480,000 pages of Torah commentary (of which "only" about 25,000 printed pages are extant), shedding light on every facet of Judaism and fusing the esoteric with the exoteric, making the whole accessible to ordinary Jews. His genius was in his use of the written **word** to illuminate the teachings of the Alter Rebbe

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

and to advance the cause of Moshiach by another major step.

Me'od-Very

The Tzemach Tzedek was succeeded by his youngest son, Rabbi Shmuel, who is known as the Rebbe Maharash.

The Rebbe Maharash's unique contribution is reflected in a Yiddish maxim that is attributed to him, *"lechatchilah ariber"*:

"The world says: If you can't go under [an obstacle],
leap over; I say: In the first place, go over!"

The import of this saying is that when it comes to spiritual matters, we should not first use conventional approaches to meet the challenges that spring up, and only when they fail dig deeper into our reserves for unconventional powers and methods of meeting those challenges. Rather, from the very outset we should try to go beyond measured conventional approaches.

The Hebrew term that best reflects this attitude is the fourth word of the verse, *"me'od-very."* It is the same word that is used in the Shema: "And you shall love G-d with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might [*me'od'cha*]." This instructs us that giving our heart and

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

soul is insufficient; we must attempt to elicit our extraordinary potential.

This message is especially relevant today, as we stand on the cusp of the Messianic Age; the age of “extraordinary-ness.” We must ignore the dictates of Galus, which beckon us to slow-down, compromise and be content with mediocrity.

B’ficha-In Your Mouth

The Rebbe Maharash’s successor was the Rabbi Sholom Dovber, known as the Rebbe Rashab. His many accomplishments included systemizing Chabad Chassidus. One of the prominent Chassidim described the Rebbe Rashab as the Maimonides of Chassidus because he organized all of the Chassidic teachings in a way that was reminiscent of Maimonides’ systemizing of Talmudic literature.

As a result of his public discourses, which he subsequently committed to writing, the Rebbe Rashab raised the scholarly standards and caliber of students of Chassidus. He put these powerful teachings in their mouths. Obviously, his goal was not just academic; he advocated using the structured and clear understanding of the subject matter to

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

strengthen our spiritual state by bringing G-dly light into our consciousness.

This contribution can be summed up by the fifth word of the verse, “*b’ficha*-in your mouth,” referring to the eloquent articulation of Chassidic teachings.

The Rebbe also described the Rebbe Rashab as paired with King David, whose royal edicts led his army to victory and paved the way for building the First Temple.

Fittingly, the Rebbe Rashab referred to his disciples as the Soldiers of the House of David, who were cultivated to wage war against those who mock G-d and His Moshiach. A king’s power is actualized through speech-*b’ficha*-in your mouth.

Bilvavcha-In Your Heart

The Rebbe Rashab was succeeded by his son, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, known as the Rebbe Rayatz.

Among his contributions to the widespread dissemination of Chassidic teachings was the way he preserved the heart and soul of Chassidic life by his warm, inspiring portrayal of Chassidic history. The Rebbe Rayatz was also known for his incredible sensitivity, warmth and his emotional outpourings of sorrow and joy.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

One may suggest that his contribution to Chassidus (in addition, of course, to his voluminous output of Chassidic philosophy, and total self-sacrifice for Judaism in the former Soviet Union) can be summed up by the sixth word of our verse, “*bilvavcha*-in your heart.”

La’asoso-To Observe It-to Do and Perfect It

The Rebbe Rayatz’s successor, our own Rebbe, took all of the contributions of his predecessors and translated them into action. The Rebbe combines unparalleled scholarly genius with a total dedication to each and every Jew, and to all of humanity. And while all of his predecessors brought us to the last stage of spiritual preparation for the Messianic Age, the Rebbe stated that his and our mission is to complete the task and bring Moshiach and the Final Redemption, literally!

The word that describes a finished product is the seventh and final word in the verse, “*la’asoso*-to observe it,” but translated more precisely as, “to do and complete it.”

This encapsulates our generation’s imperative mission: to complete the task of bringing G-d’s revealed presence into our world, the very purpose of Creation itself.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

As we come to the end of the year 5777, poised to enter into the New Year of 5778 (the acronym for which can be *t'hei, shnas, idan chadash*-May it be a year of a New Era), may we all be inscribed and sealed with a good and sweet year, with the arrival of Moshiach and the Final Redemption even before Rosh Hashanah!

ESSAY THIRTEEN

THE POWER OF PREPARATION

Rabbi Chananyah ben Akashya says: “G-d wanted to provide the Jewish people with merit so he increased for them the Torah and its commandments”

We should not think of a Mitzvah as an onerous burden; rather, it is an incredible opportunity to find one more exquisite piece of treasure.

Second, the more Mitzvos we have the more we become refined.

Third, each Mitzvah binds us to G-d. The benefits of “merit” and “refinement” pale in comparison to the idea that we finite beings can connect to the infinite G-d.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY THIRTEEN

THE POWER OF PREPARATION

Even Babies!

The parsha Vayeilech contains within it the two last commandments of the Torah, numbers 612 and 613. Commandment 612 is about the Hakhel observance during the Festival of Sukkos of the post-Sabbatical year. [Mitzvah number 613 is about writing a Torah scroll.]

The Mitzvah of Hakhel is described in the Torah thus:

Moses commanded them saying, “At the end of [every] seven years, at an appointed time, in the Festival of Sukkos, [after] the year of release.

When all Israel comes to appear before G-d, your G-d, in the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before all of Israel, in their ears.

Assemble the people: the men, women, and the children, and the convert in your cities, in order that they will hear, and in order that they will learn and

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

fear G-d your G-d, and be careful to observe all the words of this Torah.

This year, Mitzvah 612 assumes a particular importance because the New Year we are entering, 5776, is a post-Sabbatical year and in the days of old, when the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, the king would read selections of the Torah to the entire Jewish nation, men, women and children. Indeed, the Torah uses the word *taf*, which actually includes little children!

Why Bring Toddlers?

The Talmud asks why they brought the little children.

The Talmud answers that it was “to give reward to those who bring them.” While the children, particularly, little children, were incapable of learning or even listening to the words of the Torah read by the king, the Torah wanted to reward the parents for bringing them.

R. Chaim Vital, the primary disciple of the great Kabbalist known as the Arizal, offers an inspiring explanation in the name of his master as to why the Torah requested that parents bring their children.

Normally, when both parents go on a trip, they have no other choice than to take their children with them,

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

especially little children. It stands to reason that when the Torah required both men and women to attend the Hakhel observance, it was assumed that they would bring their children along with them. Why then did they need to be commanded to bring the children? A Mitzvah, by definition, is a commandment. If we would perform that act anyhow without being told, there is no need to command us. The Torah does not command us to breathe, eat or drink. Why then command us to bring our children?

Parenthetically, one of the explanations why women are exempted from the first Mitzvah of the Torah, which is to procreate, is that she does need to be commanded to have children. It is the most natural thing for a woman to want children. They do not need the Mitzvah.

Similarly, there is no need to tell parents to bring their children to the Hakhel celebration because it would be odd for them not to. And yet, the Torah does exactly that; it commands them to bring their children! Why?

The answer is that G-d wants us to take an ordinary quotidian act and turn it into a Mitzvah, a Divine experience.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Mitzvos: The More the Merrier or Meri[tor]er.

This concept can be said to be rooted in the words of the Mishnah:

Rabbi Chananyah ben Akashya says: “G-d wanted to provide the Jewish people with merit so he increased for them the Torah and its commandments, as it says, “G-d wanted for the sake of His righteousness, so he made the Torah greater and more beautiful.”

Taken at face value, Rabbi Chananyah is referring to the 613 commandments. Each Mitzvah endows us with more avenues to acquire merits. The more Mitzvos we have, the better off we are.

The simple and obvious message is that we should not think of a Mitzvah as an onerous burden; rather, it is an incredible opportunity to find one more exquisite piece of treasure.

Moreover, the word for merit in Hebrew, *zechus*, has also been rendered by the Maggid of Mezeritch (the successor to the Ba'al Shem Tov as leader of the Chassidic movement) as refinement. The more Mitzvos we have the more we become refined.

However, in light of the Arizal's explanation for the Torah commanding the parents to bring their children, we can

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

discover a deeper understanding of Rabbi Chananyah's words. If Rabbi Chananyah was extolling the virtue of every Mitzvah, they are far greater than just the source of merit and refinement. There is a far more fundamental reason for each and every Mitzvah. Each Mitzvah binds us to G-d. Indeed, the very word itself means both commandment and bond. The benefits of "merit" and "refinement" pale in comparison to the idea that we finite beings can connect to the infinite G-d. There is nothing more sublime than that.

Rabbi Chananyah, when discussing the merits we accumulate and how we become refined, therefore, was addressing those ordinary acts which the Torah regards as a Mitzvah even though we would have done them regardless of the commandment.

A timely example: Why is building a Sukkah regarded as a Mitzvah? Once we know that G-d wants us to dwell in a Sukkah during the Festival of Sukkos, isn't it obvious that we have to build one? Why the need for an express command for us to do something that we would have done anyhow? This is essentially the same question we asked regarding the need for a Mitzvah to bring little children.

The answer provided by the 19th century commentary *Hemek Shailoh* is reminiscent of the Arizal's explanation concerning the Mitzvah to bring children to the Hakhel celebration. True, *Hemek Shailoh* states, we don't need a

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Mitzvah to want to build a sukkah, but nevertheless the Torah wanted us to accumulate more merit so it increased the number of Mitzvos to include even those actions that we would have performed without the express command. Otherwise inconsequential acts, actions we would have done anyhow, are thus elevated to the full-fledged status of Mitzvos with all of their attendant benefits.

Don't Underestimate the Power of Any Mitzvah

Reading this message on the Shabbos before Yom Kippur suggests that there is a special message before the Day of Atonement.

As we come before G-d on this final Day of Judgment, seeking to arm ourselves with as many Mitzvos as possible, it behooves us to add these “auxiliary” Mitzvos to our repertoire. These Mitzvos add to our merit and help us tip the scales of judgment in our favor.

No time to Sin

There is an interesting Midrash concerning the period between Yom Kippur and Sukkos about building the Sukkah,. When the Torah introduces the Festival of Sukkos, it refers to it as the “first Day,” rather than “the fifteenth

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

day of the month.” The Midrash takes note of this and explains that the first day of Sukkos is the “first day of accounting for sins.” The Midrash explains that after Yom Kippur our sins are forgiven but we do not start a new slate until the first day of the Festival of Sukkos because in the four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkos we are so preoccupied with Mitzvos (such as building a Sukkah and procuring the Lulav, etc.), we have neither time nor inclination to sin.

Chassidic commentators have noted that the Sukkos Holiday is laden with Mitzvos, chief among them sitting in the Sukkah, the blessing and waving of the Four Kinds, numerous prayers and Torah readings. Yet it is the four day period of **preparation** that is credited with keeping us away from sin.

In a certain sense, the preparation for a Mitzvah is actually more spiritually potent than the Mitzvah itself. The preparations, which did not need a direct command, are elevated to the level of a Mitzvah and possess an even greater capacity to provide us with merit and refinement. And it is the power of refinement that keeps us from sinning.

The Talmud states that reward for our observance of most Mitzvos comes in the next world. However, many

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

commentators point out that we reap the reward for the **preparations** we make for the Mitzvah, in this world.

One explanation for the distinction between our actions and the timing of the reward is that there is no greater force for refinement than the hard work of getting ready for the Mitzvah. Once a person is refined, she or he reaps other physical benefits as well.

In the Preparation Mode

We are now situated in the eve before the ultimate Holiday of Redemption. On the one hand, the ideal time for observing the Mitzvos will be in the future Messianic Era, when we will have the Bais Hamikdash rebuilt and life's conditions will facilitate the uncompromised and unadulterated observance of all the commandments. We refer to this in our Shabbos prayers when we ask G-d to rebuild the Temple so that we can follow the "commandments with love, in accordance with Your will."

The Mitzvos we perform now have been described by Rashi as a preparation for the ultimate observance in the future. Lest one think that the Mitzvos we do now are inconsequential, we are reminded that, on the contrary, they have the enhanced power of refinement that brings the Redemption in its wake. The Mitzvos we do now that

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

seem to be of secondary value were elevated by G-d to the highest order. These Mitzvos will enable us to break through all the barriers and lead us to the ultimate Hakhel, when all Jews will be united in hearing the King Moshiach read the Torah.

A G'mar Chasimah Tova! May you all be sealed for a good and sweet year!

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY FOURTEEN

BRINGING LIGHT INTO THE DARKNESS AND REMOVING DARKNESS FROM THE LIGHT

There are three approaches to darkness and light:

The first focuses on the way we must look for light even as we sit in the darkness of exile.

The second is to see the light of the future and live with it.

The third approach is to not allow darkness to intrude in times of light.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY FOURTEEN

BRINGING LIGHT INTO THE DARKNESS AND REMOVING DARKNESS FROM THE LIGHT

Concealment

Right before Moses' passing, G-d informs him of the future of the Jewish people; how they will eventually turn against G-d's covenant and how G-d will hide His face from them:

On that day, I will become very angry with them. I will forsake them and hide My face from them... I will surely hide [literally: hide, I shall hide] My face on that day...

Queen Esther in the Torah

This double expression of G-d concealing His face from the Jewish people has been treated in different ways by the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. Both see the positive in the Divine concealment, but in divergent ways, consistent with their diverse approaches.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

In the Babylonian Talmud (Chagigah 5b) we read:

The Holy One blessed is He said, "although I have concealed My face from them, I will speak to them in a dream."

Although G-d has ceased to communicate with us overtly, He still finds ways of communicating with us via dreams.

In another passage, the Babylonian Talmud (Chulin 139b) states:

Where is Esther hinted in the Torah? "*V'anaochi haster astir*—I will surely hide..."

The Hebrew word for "I will hide" is "*astir*," with an obvious phonetic relationship to the word Esther.

The Talmud's message here is that Queen Esther lived in a time when G-d's presence was concealed. The Jewish people were living in the Persian exile. King Achashveirosh expressly forbade reconstruction of the Temple, and there was no hope in sight. Haman, the influential Prime Minister of the Persian Empire, successfully convinced the king to allow the annihilation of the entire Jewish people. One cannot imagine a more concealed state of existence!

Yet, notwithstanding all of these concealments: Haman's plan is foiled, Mordechai is promoted to the office of Prime Minister, the enemies of the Jews are handily defeated, and

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

the Queen of the Persian Empire is a righteous Jewish woman!

The common theme of these two selections from the Babylonian Talmud is that even in the darkness there is light. Even in exile G-d has ways of allowing His presence to shine through the cracks. Miracles, albeit cloaked in nature, still do occur.

Wake up, Queen Esther is Here!

There is a third source in the Midrash which comments on the 127 provinces that Queen Esther reigned over, as told in the Book of Esther.

The Midrash recounts that once when Rabbi Akiva was teaching his students started to doze off. He startled them awake by asking a rhetorical question that was totally unrelated to his nominal subject matter:

Why did Esther merit to reign over 127 provinces. Said the Holy one Blessed is He, "Let Esther, the granddaughter of Sarah who lives to the age of 127, and reign on 127 provinces."

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

If Rabbi Akiva was looking for a way to awaken his students, why did he resort to a totally unrelated topic to awaken them? And if he wanted to jolt them out of their reverie by abruptly changing the subject, why of all possible topics did he choose Queen Esther's reign, in particular?

Rabbi Akiva lived in a time of utter concealment, shortly after the Second Bais Hamikdash was destroyed and countless Jews slaughtered by the Romans. Darkness shrouded the Land of Israel. In a time of darkness and profound Divine concealment people fall asleep; if not literally then figuratively and they cannot function fully.

Rabbi Akiva realized that his students had fallen under the yoke of darkness and despair. Their minds were barely receptive to the teachings of Torah. Only Rabbi Akiva, and perhaps a handful of other Sages, had a positive and optimistic view of the future. When Rabbi Akiva passed the ruins of the Temple he laughed while his colleagues cried. Rabbi Akiva recognized that the concealment was a prelude to much greater light afterwards; he saw the future in the present. But his disciples were not that sanguine; they saw the darkness and it put them to "sleep."

Rabbi Akiva realized that he could not rouse them to the point where they would see the future the way he did. At least, he thought, I will get them to see the silver lining in

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

the darkness of the present: the majority of Jews lived in the Diaspora, the Temple remained in ruins and continuous persecution by the ruthless Romans. Rabbi Akiva therefore changed the subject to Queen Esther's ability to reign over 127 provinces. Notwithstanding the fact that she was Esther, which stands for concealment, some light shined through her.

This power, Rabbi Akiva contended, was bequeathed to her, and to all Jews, from our Matriarch Sarah, who despite having lived a difficult "concealed" life, nevertheless lived to the age of 127 with great equanimity. As Rashi explains, Sarah's entire life was equally good. She was able to see the positive silver lining in the negative, and so can we.

Isaiah's Reversal of Achaz

The Jerusalem Talmud, however, applies G-d's concealment to another situation:

Referring to the Biblical account of King Achaz, who shut down all the Houses of Torah study so that the Divine presence would depart from Israel, the Jerusalem Talmud cites a verse in the Book of Isaiah where the prophet says:

I await G-d, Who has concealed His face from the House of Jacob, and I will hope for Him.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

The Jerusalem Talmud comments on this verse:

There was no more difficult time in the world than the moment G-d said to Moses, "I will surely hide My face on that day." From that moment onward [Isaiah said] "I will hope for Him," for Moses was told at Sinai: "For it [the Torah] will not depart from the mouths of your children."

Commentators explain that Isaiah looked beyond G-d's promise of concealment, which seemed to have materialized when Achaz prevented Torah learning. Isaiah did not accept that concealment as a fait accompli, for G-d also promised that the Torah would never be forgotten. Isaiah then began teaching children anew and reversed Achaz's actions.

Babylonian and Jerusalem Patterns

When we analyze the differences between the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud the following pattern emerges:

The Babylonian Talmud speaks of seeing the light in the darkness. Even when one is in the dark exile there is light. G-d still communicates with us, albeit in a filtered way, as though in a dream. The Babylonian Talmud also sees the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

concealment in the time of and associated with Queen Esther, who nevertheless prevailed over Haman and brought prosperous times for the Jews in the Persian Empire, albeit, within the framework of the concealing exile.

The Jerusalem Talmud, however, speaks of a time when the Jews were **not** in exile. Achaz and Isaiah lived in the Land of Israel in the period of the First Temple. What Achaz endeavored to do was bring concealment and darkness in a time and place of light; as opposed to Queen Esther, who brought light into the time of darkness. And it is this intrusion of darkness that Isaiah successfully reversed. Isaiah brought light into a time of light.

Three Perspectives

Upon deeper reflection we can detect three perspectives that emerge from the above sources.

The first is the Babylonian Talmud's approach, which focuses on the way we must look for light even as we sit in the darkness of exile. This approach is consistent with the Babylonian Talmud being called (in the Babylonian Talmud itself) the Talmud of darkness because it was composed in the Babylonian Diaspora. In addition, it uses the Socratic approach of posing countless questions. Questions can be

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

obstructions to knowledge, but ultimately through them we finally see the light.

Rabbi Akiva was on a higher level even considering the terrible exile conditions that prevailed in his day. He was able to rise above exile and see the light of the future and live with it. His students were not ready for that so he attempted to lead them higher and let them see some light in the present.

The Jerusalem Talmud represents a third approach consistent with its style. Compiled in Israel, it was written in a very direct manner with far fewer questions and less of the back-and-forth give-and-take debating methodology of the Babylonian Talmud. This points to, and is a sample of, the perspective of the world of Redemption; a world where everything is bright and clear.

But even in this liberated situation, there can be darkness; it is still possible for an alien force of concealment and darkness to intrude onto the state of light. Until such time as the final Redemption will be complete, there is always the possibility for some “Achaz-esque” personality to come along, who will see things through negative or dark colored glasses no matter how bright the light is. Isaiah, the prophet of Moshiach and Redemption, will then come along and dismiss those distracting thoughts and attitudes and dispel the foreign darkness.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

“The Time of Your Redemption has Arrived!”

We are living in the time when the approach of the Jerusalem Talmud is most relevant.

The Rebbe told us that we are no longer in the same era of exile we were previously. The Rebbe explained that this means that the Redemption is situated right in front of us. All we have to do is “open our eyes” and recognize this new reality. It’s high time for us to drag the Redemption standing outside our door into our lives.

This doesn’t mean that things are now, at the moment of the writing of this essay, hunky dory. But we have to look at the negatives of today as the aberration and not as the rule. These negatives represent the intrusion of a foreign influence, trying to superimpose itself on the dynamic of Redemption which is now the reality.

While it still looks like exile, the exile is found in our look. In the past we were ensconced in exile and still had a long and arduous journey ahead to reach the period in which the dynamics of Redemption would prevail. “Today,” the Rebbe told us, “the time of your Redemption has arrived.” We may still see things with Golus-tinted glasses as the Achaz of old did in his own time but reality dictates that we are standing face to face with Redemption!.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

We must be the Isaiahs of today who defy the prediction of concealment and instead embrace the promise that the Torah will never cease from our children, a promise that is rooted in reality.

ESSAY FIFTEEN

THE LAST MITZVAH-THE SEAL OF JUDAISM

Rabbi Meir stated:

A document is not complete unless it is signed.

**The Mitzvah of writing a Torah scroll is only considered a
written Torah when it is completed and sealed.**

**Moreover, the very concept of the Written Torah is one
that is interwoven with the idea of a “seal;” G-d’s seal of
truth.**

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY FIFTEEN

THE LAST MITZVAH-THE SEAL OF JUDAISM

Writing a Torah Scroll

The last Mitzvah of the Torah is the Mitzvah to write a Torah scroll. Every Jew is commanded to write a Torah scroll to facilitate learning its G-dly teachings.

According to many authorities, this Mitzvah can be fulfilled now by acquiring Torah texts, even if they are printed, since the objective of this Mitzvah is the study of Torah. However, all opinions agree that it is certainly desirable, meritorious and beautiful to have an actual Torah scroll written (either personally, or by delegating the Mitzvah to a scribe), to be used in the regular Torah readings in the synagogue.

Whenever a Torah scroll has been completed by one congregation it was a celebration for the entire Jewish community. Everyone joined in competing and welcoming the Torah scroll into its new quarters. It is arguably

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Judaism's most joyous ritual modeled after the celebration that occurs every year in Simchat Torah.

Dedicating a Torah Scroll

The Buffalo Jewish community has the privilege of witnessing the completion of this last Mitzvah. The community joined the Greenberg family in dedicating this Torah to the memory of my illustrious father, Rabbi Meyer Greenberg, whose life was the very embodiment of Torah.

My father's name Meir ties in with this special Mitzvah in more than one way.

According to my father's namesake, the Talmudic sage, Rabbi Meir, the word "write" mentioned in the context of written documents, suggests not simply the writing of a text but, more importantly, the signatures that are affixed to the end of the text and that confer legal status to the document. In Rabbi Meir's words translated literally: "The [word] "and he shall **write**" does not mean anything but [and he shall] **seal**." In other words, writing is only worthy of that term if it leads to its completion. In the case of a document, it is not complete unless it is signed by witnesses.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

This statement of Rabbi Meir, the Rebbe—in one of his landmark discourses recited at the completion of a Torah scroll; that was written with the express intention of giving it to Moshiach upon his arrival—applied to the Mitzvah of writing a Torah scroll, which is only considered a written Torah when it is completed and sealed. Moreover, the very concept of the Written Torah is one that is interwoven with the idea of a “seal.”

G-d’s Seal is Truth

Our Sages teach: “The seal of G-d is truth.” In Hebrew, the word truth, *Emes*, is more than the opposite of a lie. According to the Jerusalem Talmud, *Emes* comprises the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. When we speak of G-d’s attribute of truth that is reflected in the Torah we are speaking of a truth that never changes.

Not only does Torah not change with the passage of time, but, more importantly, Torah—which originates in G-d’s “mind” and is inextricably bound with G-d Himself—retains its pristine G-dly nature even when it “descends” into the physical realm. Even when one writes a Torah scroll, with physical ink written on physical parchment, it is a reflection of its G-dly source.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Two Characteristics of a Seal

A seal possesses two characteristics: It is the guarantee that what has been written will not be altered. Second, it is affixed to the document, which means that it is where the abstract concepts are translated into the concrete physical realm. These two ideas allude to the truth of Torah: Torah never changes and its Divine nature can be expressed even in the realm of the physical.

Moses was the first person to write a Torah scroll at the end of his life, empowering all of us who possess a spark of his soul within ours, to realize the ideal of *Emes* in our lives. Likewise Moshiach, who—according to our Sages—possesses the soul of Moses, must also write a Torah scroll, which might suggest that the Messianic Age—the seal of history—will be ushered in with the writing of Torah scrolls.

Whenever a Torah scroll is completed it helps to end our stay in exile. It infuses us with the power vested within Torah that will help bring Moshiach, whom we shall soon greet with this new Torah scroll along with all the other Torah scrolls that have ever been written.

ESSAY SIXTEEN

THE SONG THAT NEVER ENDS

Aa song touches a part of our soul that words cannot reach.

Rabbi *Schneur Zalman of Liadi* stated:

“Speech is the pen of the heart, melody is the pen of the soul.”

Torah, likewise, has the capacity to speak to the very soul of a Jew, not just his mind and heart.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY SIXTEEN

THE SONG THAT NEVER ENDS

The Last Commandment

The very last commandment in the Torah, its 613th, mentioned in this week's parsha, *Vayeilech*, is to write a Torah Scroll.

In the Biblical text the Torah does not explicitly mention that one is to write the entire Five Books of Moses. Rather it states: "And now write this song."

On the surface, the Torah seems to be referring to the song that appears in next week's *parsha* and not to the entire Five Book's of Moses.

Maimonides—basing himself on the Talmud— explains that since we are not permitted to write just one section of the Torah by itself, it could not have meant that we should merely write this one song. Hence, we know that the commandment is to actually write the entire Five Books of Moses that contains this song.

The question begs to be asked. If the Torah wanted us to

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

write the Five Books of Moses, it could have said precisely that. Why does it have to say that we should write this song and rely on the Oral Tradition that proved that this command is a reference to the entire Five Books of Moses?

“Speech is the pen of the heart, melody is the pen of the soul.”

It is obvious that the Torah wanted to impart to us a crucial lesson about the very nature of the Torah. The Torah—in its entirety—is a song. Even the parts that are written in prose, even the laws and words of rebuke, are in reality a song.

What does the characterization of the Torah as a song signify?

There are many analogies one can find between the Torah and a song.

First, a song touches a part of our soul that words cannot reach. Rabbi *Schneur Zalman of Liadi* —the founder of the Chabad movement, whose birthday we celebrated recently on the 19th of Elul—summed it up best when he said: “Speech is the pen of the heart, melody is the pen of the soul.”

Torah, likewise, has the capacity to speak to the very soul

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

of a Jew, not just his mind and heart.

Instills Joy

Second, a song is generally associated with joy. When the Jews crossed the Sea of Reeds, they sung jubilant praise to G-d. And though there are songs that can express feelings of sadness, the primary role of music in Judaism, is to bring joy and spirit to an otherwise prosaic experience. And even the more somber melodies, while they do not bring joy, they do generate feelings of aesthetic delight.

So too, Torah can become the person's greatest source of joy and delight. King David devotes an entire Psalm—Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the entire Torah—to extol the virtue of Torah as a song.

Endless

Third, a song has no end. When one comes to the end of the song, it is only natural for one to start all over again. A song, unlike a lecture, is meant to be repeated over and over again. Indeed, the tempo of the melody increases each and every time the song begins anew.

Similarly, the nature of Torah is to begin its study anew, soon after it is completed on *Simchat Torah*. When one

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

learns Torah, one touches infinity and is thereby moved to repeat the words of Torah. Each and every time we begin the Torah anew, we actually experience a marked increase in the energy level and enthusiasm for Torah.

Removes Rough Edges

Fourth, a song has the capacity to convey a message without offending or shocking the recipient of the message. Even harsh words of rebuke that are couched in a melody can have a positive effect. The melody possesses a soothing and cushioning effect on us.

Similarly, the words of Torah, no matter how powerful and pointed they may be, have a soothing effect particularly on those who appreciate Torah's celestial song.

Elevator

Fifth, a song has the capacity to lift us off the ground and raise us to a higher plane of existence.

Likewise Torah study is an uplifting experience that takes us into a higher place.

Just as we were inducted into nationhood—at the time of the Exodus and Revelation at Sinai—by way of the song

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

the Israelites sang when they crossed the sea, Biblical literature affirms that the future and final Redemption will also be inaugurated with song.

Difference between Prose and Song of Torah

One can still raise a question. Why is this characterization of Torah as a song not mentioned or alluded to earlier? Why do we have to wait to the very end of the Torah to learn of its poetic nature?

The answer to this question is that, indeed, Torah contains both elements of prose and of song. The difference between these two elements is that the dimension of prose within the Torah one can grasp and even master, one book, parsha, paragraph, verse and even word, at a time. One does not require having the Torah in its entirety to appreciate the wisdom and information contained in any one part of it.

When it comes to the melody of Torah, by contrast, if even one note is missing it affects the integrity of the entire composition. Thus, the Torah refers to the song of Torah when the Torah is about to be completed.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Song of the Future

What is true about the Torah, that its poetic nature—the part that is overtly infinite—is revealed at its end, can also be applied to the end of days. Only when Moshiach will come will we be exposed to the Torah’s deepest secrets and melodies.

We can take this idea a step further and apply it to the Jewish people. The word Israel in Hebrew is said to be an acronym, “There are 600,000 letters in the Torah.” This suggests that the Jewish people—whose original census totaled 600,000 souls—are a human version of a Torah scroll; each individual corresponds to a letter of the Torah. We too, possess a prosaic dimension and a poetic one.

Our more spiritual character—the song aspect of our existence—will come to the fore at the end of days, when the Jewish people complete their mission in exile. When the human Torah reaches completion, our infinite dimension, will become the dominant one. Upon realizing this dimension of our being we will truly and literally be moved to sing the ultimate song.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

NO STANDING!

**One must be prepared to yield and move aside when
someone else's interests are at stake.**

**The parsha of Nitzavim underscores the virtue of
stubbornness and firmness when it comes to principles.**

**Vayeilech teaches that when it comes to personal matters
one must be flexible and forgo our interests in the interests
of others.**

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

NO STANDING!

Diametrically Opposite Approaches

In some years the parsha *Vayeilech* is read independently of the preceding parsha of *Nitzavim*. In truth, these two portions actually form one parsha, and in most years they are read together.

Nitzavim means standing firm, while Vayeilech (which means “And he [Moses] went”) connotes movement from one place to another. These two names represent diametrically opposite approaches. In Jewish life, there are principles and values that cannot be changed. What must change is us.

The virtue of one who stands firm (Nitzavim) is that no one or nothing can budge a person who has principles. And the virtue associated with movement (Vayeilech) is that the person employs his or her steadfastness to their principles, not to their own person quirks, idiosyncrasies, or personal interests and needs. When it comes to one’s

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

selfish interests one is flexible and malleable; when it comes to other people's needs, one stands with firm resolve to help. (Obviously, there are limits to that as well. One does not help a drug addict procure drugs, and the like. But, that is another matter, for in that situation, one who thinks he is helping is actually harming)

It is crucial that one does not reverse the two: To be unyielding when it comes to their own needs, and very flexible when it comes to upholding principles. How often do we hear people say how flexible and non-judgmental they are with Jewish law. But if you do something to irk them personally, they are unforgiving and steadfastly indignant. Their liberalism and flexibility goes to the wayside.

In most years, when we read the two halves of the parsha Nitavim and Vayeilech together, the flexibility of Vayeilech tempers the steadfastness and firmness or Nitzavim.

This Year's Emphasis

In this year, when Vayeilech is separated from Nitzavim, greater emphasis has to be placed on the idea of movement in our lives that is not tempered by our emphasis on firmness.

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

What Makes this Year Unique?

Perhaps the difference between the reading of Vayeilech this year and other years when it is read together with Nitzavim is that in past years the movement desired is one that is intended to temper the mode of firmness, i.e., one must be prepared to yield and move aside when someone else's interests are at stake. After reading and internalizing the lesson of Nitzavim that underscores the virtue of stubbornness and firmness, it is necessary to temper that with the knowledge that when it comes to personal matters one must be flexible.

However, this year, when we read Vayeilech apart from Nitzavim, it has an independent message. Not only should one be prepared to yield for others, but even in matters of principle and convictions one must constantly grow and change (this is not intended as a political endorsement). One should not just be moving aside for others, one should be moving forward.

Grow and Change

Even someone as great as Moses—about whom it is written “And he went”—must change. And even though it was the last day of his life, Moses recognized that he must still grow and change. This sheds light on why the phrase

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

“and Moses went” is not mentioned earlier in the Torah. It is to underscore that Moses never stopped growing even until his last breath.

When our souls were still in Paradise they, as the angels, are referred to as “standing.” They cannot move from one place to another, because any progress they make in the spiritual sense is incremental and within range of their point of origin. Only when we enter into this physical world—when our souls inhabit bodies—can we break away from our previous location and acquire the title “mover.” Because of the challenges in this world, every movement forward we make is a quantum leap.

The fact that the first Sabbath of the New Year is Vayeilech, suggests that this year is all about what we do to grow, not resting on our laurels of the past year

Year of Hakhel

This message is amplified in a year of Hakhel. In this week’s parsha, the Torah commanded the Jewish people to gather in the Temple in the post Sabbatical year. The king would then read the Torah as a reenactment of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

The fact that this commandment is mentioned in the parsha called Vayeilech that signifies continual movement and growth suggests that the message of movement pertains to the Mitzvah of Hakhel.

Community Versus Individual

Perhaps the message is that we ordinarily associate growth to an individual who is free to chart his or her own course. A community, however, is far more constrained in terms of their ability to change.

Here the Torah teaches us otherwise.

In the parsha Vayeilech that revolves around the theme of constant movement and quantum leaps, the Jewish nation was commanded—as a people—to gather every seven years—seven representing the natural cycle—to break out of that cycle, as good and holy as it was, and travel back to the Sinai Experience that transported them into a new world of G-dly reality.

The year of Hakhel, should be geared to gatherings of Jews for the purpose of strengthening our bonds with the Sinai experience and to forge a collective as well as individual force that will enable us to break out of the constraints of exile, By doing so we will greet the King Moshiach, as he is

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

referred to in rabbinic literature, who will read the Torah for us in the new Third Holy temple in Jerusalem.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

RISE UP!

**The worst form of decline is when one imagines that his or
her decline is actually an improvement and a form of
ascent.**

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

RISE UP!

Rising or Declining?

In this week's second parsha of Vayeilech, G-d tells Moses that in the future, after his passing, "the people will rise up and follow the gods of the people of the land into which they are coming. They will forsake Me and violate My covenant which I made with them."

The question has been asked, why does the Torah preface the prediction about their rebellion with the words, "they shall **rise up**?" These words imply that they will be rising to a higher level! It should have said, "The people will descend."

Indeed, we find this term used later with regard to Samson's going to the city of Timna, which was situated on a mountain. Yet the Torah describes his going to that city with the words, "he **descended** to Timna," because Samson's going to Timna was the beginning of his moral decline. Yet, here when the Torah speaks of the Jews' future

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

degradation it employs the term that suggests ascent and growth!

Confusing Declining for Growth

There are several approaches that can be used to explain the anomalous use of the words “rise up” as a preface to their decline:

First, it has been suggested that it reflects the extent to which the people will degenerate. The worst form of decline is when one imagines that his or her decline is actually an improvement and a form of ascent.

Throughout Jewish history there were groups and individuals who sought to follow other cultures and other gods. In the process they drifted away from pure Jewish values. Notwithstanding the fact that they were distancing themselves from G-d, their people and from basic decency, in their warped way of thinking they were helping to improve on Jewish values or that Judaism actually demanded their corrupt behavior.

The worst form of decline is when it is misconstrued as growth and a virtue; not a vice.

Thus when the Torah says that they will rise up it describes not the reality—for the reality is that it is the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

greatest fall—rather it describes their mindset—that they will think that their errant ways as a step up rather than a precipitous and steep decline into the abyss.

Falling so Low from from so High

A second approach: The prefacing of the words “rise up” before describing their future rebellious worshipping of other gods is to underscore that the worst form of decline is when it is a fall from a high perch. For the measure of one’s decline is commensurate with their previous growth and high position. The tragedy of Jewish rebellion is that we have risen so high and despite that—or in some cases, **because** of the state of complacency that sets in when one reaches the pinnacle—we have fallen so low.

The lesson to be derived from this is that when we see someone falling, we should recognize that they come from a high place. Our challenge is to help that person regain their footing and return to their original high position minus the arrogance that it might have engendered.

Exponential Growth from the Abyss

A third and more positive explanation is that ultimately when these fallen souls finally recognize the error of their

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ways and return to G-d—as was predicted in this week’s parsha as well—their sins are then transformed into Mitzvot. This is in line with the Talmudic statement that when one’s motivation to return to G-d is out of love, his or her sins are converted into Mitzvot. Every sin becomes an asset. It would be like being able to hand in our debts and not only have the debts cancelled, but in addition, pick up a dollar for every dollar we owe.

Thus the Torah states that this great degradation will ultimately become the greatest catalyst for incredible growth. The Jewish people will realize the error of their ways and their return to G-d will be so passionate that their newly acquired love and devotion to G-d will make these returnees even occupy a higher place than those who were always righteous; in consonance with the Talmudic dictum: “The place where penitents stand, even a perfectly righteous person cannot stand.”

A New View of Negative Developments

With this last approach we can understand that there is a positive way to view all of the negative developments in the Jewish community in the last two centuries in terms of Jewish recalcitrance. And as we have already seen the

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

incredible number of Jews who have realized how far they have strayed and have returned to Judaism with such passion that they put their more sophisticated coreligionists and even forebears to shame.

As we stand before the New Year and focus on Teshuvah—repentance or return, we should not despair when we make an honest accounting of our past misdeeds and failures. On the contrary, we should allow our decline to provoke us to return to G-d with so much intensity that our past negativity will be transformed into Mitzvot.

This indeed is what will occur in the Messianic Age on a universal scale. Not only will evil cease to exert its power over good; not only will evil cease to exist; its energy will be totally transformed into positive energy.

Whatever Moshiach will do begins with us. We are the forces of goodness that will set into motion the dynamic process that will ultimately enable all of us to “rise up” and drive out all of the other gods from our land. With our return to G-d we become the forces of goodness that will tip the scales in our favor and help us prevail in our judgment this Rosh Hashanah, and will usher in a good and sweet new year; a year of true peace and Redemption for all of Israel and the entire world.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY NINETEEN

BEYOND E PLURIBUS UNUM

The challenge of life is to strike a balance between two aspects of humanity; our external and internal personas:

“External” refers to our relationships with others, our clothing, our bodies, and even the more manifest and conscious levels of our soul.

Our internal persona involves the way we relate to ourselves.

More specifically, it relates to our soul as opposed to our bodies.

Within our souls, there are inner precincts that rarely find expression in our routine lives. Certain occasions and experiences enable us to come face to face with our true inner being—the inner dimension of our souls.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

ESSAY NINETEEN

BEYOND E PLURIBUS UNUM

Three Paradoxes

The Torah portion of *Nitzavim-Vayeilech* always coincides with the New Year. In most years (as it is this year) both portions are combined and are read on the Shabbos before Rosh Hashanah. (In some years it is split into two portions, Nitzavim is read before Rosh Hashanah and Vayeilech is read separately on the Shabbos that follows Rosh Hashanah).

What is the message conveyed by these two Torah portions that prepares us for the New Year?

When we examine the content of these two *parshiyot* we are struck by their paradoxical nature.

First, the very names of these twin portions convey opposite meanings. *Nitzavim* translates as “standing firm.” *Vayeilech*, by contrast, means “and he went,” and it implies

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

movement. How do we reconcile the message of standing firm with constant movement?

Second, the opening verse of *Nitzavim* reads: “You are standing firmly today before G-d your G-d.” This—as the Ba’al Shem Tov, whose birthday was observed last Shabbos, the Chai-18th of Elul, states—refers to our judgment on Rosh Hashanah. We are guaranteed to be victorious in our case before G-d when we are judged on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment. The implication of this optimistic assertion is that we are all virtuous and deserving of a positive verdict in this judgment.

Yet throughout the parsha there are ample references to our rebellious and sinful nature. How, then, are we to view ourselves? Are we to focus on our righteousness and ignore all of our shortcomings? Or should we be honest about our failings and recognize the brutal truth that we are flawed individuals?

Third, *Nitzavim* begins with a description of our unity; how we all stand **together** before our G-d. Yet immediately afterwards the Torah enumerates no less than ten distinct categories of Jews, from the heads to the water carriers! Are we truly one? Or are we a conglomerate of distinct entities? How can both statements be true?

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

In short, on the one hand we are seen as standing firm, meritorious, and unified, and on the other hand we are characterized as in constant flux, flawed, and fragmented. Which is it?

A Tale of Two Tiers

All these apparent contradictions can be resolved with one premise that views the human condition on two levels and sees the challenge of life as one of striking the balance between them:

There is our external persona. “External” can refer to our relationships with others, our clothing, our bodies, and even the more manifest and conscious levels of our soul.

There is also an internal persona which we all possess, though we may not be aware of its existence. Unlike our relationships with which we deal with the world outside of our own, our internal identity involves the way we relate to ourselves. More specifically, it relates to our soul as opposed to our bodies. But even within our souls, there are inner precincts that rarely find expression in our routine lives. However, there are certain occasions and experiences that enable us to come face to face with our true inner being—the inner dimension of our souls.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Self-Examination

When we take the time to invest the energy—as we are commanded to do in this month of Elul—to examine ourselves (as well as the way we should view others), we must recognize that there two distinct dimensions of our personalities that we must investigate:

First and foremost, we have to know who we truly are and what our essential identity truly is. We must realize that—regardless of who we are and where we think we stand—we have an intimate relationship with G-d because of the inner dimension of our soul that is always connected to its G-dly source. Because of this relationship we also know that we will inevitably end up “standing firm” in our judgment because G-d will not allow those who stand before Him to fail.

Once we reach that conclusion, we must then “roll up our sleeves” and work on our external persona that may be totally out of sync with our internal self. To change our external identity we must unleash the power that derives from our essential bond with G-d and thereby bring purity and atonement to all aspects of our lives.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Unum E-Pluribus

We can now understand the reason why the Torah speaks of the Jewish people as one and then divides them up into categories. When dealing with our essential identity we are indeed one. We cannot distinguish one Jew from the other. Moses, on this plane, is no more of a Jew than the simple “water carrier,” and the water carrier is no less of a Jew than Moses.

From the perspective of our external identities there are indeed differences among the various classes of Jews. There are people whose role in life are to be leaders, and they must not shirk the responsibility that goes along with leadership in the guise that after all we are all really equal anyhow. The same G-d that made our inner soul one with the inner soul of the other is the same G-d Who gave us different appearances, attitudes, personalities and diverse talents.

Just as we must allow our inner dimension influence and inspire our outer beings, so too we are challenged to allow the unifying aspect of our inner souls to inform and impact our diversity so that even as we express diverse and often conflicting viewpoints we never lose sight of the fundamental fact that we are truly—not just metaphorically—one!

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

If we think about this concept it goes beyond the motto E-pluribus Unum to, indeed, make one out of the many. This implies that we are essentially many and that we must seek to bring unity to that many. Our parsha tells us that we are essentially one (Unum) and that we have to instill that oneness into our differences.

Moving While Standing

We can now resolve the third apparent contradiction as to whether we stand in one place or do we constantly move.

Our inner soul is the part of us that is stable and in no need of growing. It is the anchor that provides for stability in an otherwise chaotic and forever fluctuating world. But while our inner persona stands firm, our external identity is forever searching, probing, and discovering new depth and meaning in life.

Growing and moving from one place to another is like any physical journey though; it is fraught with danger. One's life's journey can take us far away from our true destination. Growth can sometimes conflict with the ideals which are in consonance with who we really are and which transport us to alien places where we don't really belong.

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

Again the ultimate challenge is to allow the anchor of our inner soul to prevent us from faltering and losing our balance, focus, and direction as we journey through the vicissitudes of life.

Putting a Head on Our Shoulders

As we enter a new year these two dimensions come into focus. This is the time of the year when we are so much closer to realizing that we have an inner soul. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that essential bond between G-d and us is most likely to come into the spotlight. And it is therefore the time of the year when we get in touch with the anchor of our lives. That, in turn, provides us with the confidence that G-d will give us a good and sweet year because we are—in essence -- good and sweet, even as we are brutally honest in acknowledging our external shortcomings.

For the same reason, this is also the time of the year when the differences between us are much less divisive and discordant than usual throughout the year because at this unique time we are closer to the awareness of the unifying character of our inner soul.

Without the unifying force of Rosh Hashanah our inner essence, or the “Rosh-Head” of our soul, is, figuratively

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

speaking detached from the body of our soul. Rosh Hashanah can thus be described as the day when our head is reattached to our body. In medical terminology, Rosh Hashanah is like recovery from a stroke which compromised the connections of the brain to the rest of the body.

Redemption: Recovery from a Stroke

All this is true each and every year as we come to the end of one year and are ready to usher in the New Year. It is especially true and relevant when we are not just situated at the end of the year but also at the end of the “old” system and are ready to enter into the new epoch of the Messianic Age.

The old system we call *Galus*-exile, when we experience the dichotomous forces of separation, separation of one Jew from another, separation from our Holy Land which is our true Homeland, and separation from the essence of our soul. It is no wonder that the process of *Galus* has been likened to a stroke because of the debilitating results that *Galus* engendered. *Galus* is the ultimate instrument of detachment from our true inner selves.

Geulah, or Redemption, therefore, is the process by which the head or “Rosh” of our soul—the inner essence of our

LIGHT FORM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH

soul—is no longer detached from the external aspects of our lives. The inner soul thus provides catharsis and purification, stability and direction to all layers of our personalities as well as to the entirety of the nation regardless of which level each one is on.

A Kesivah Vachismah Tova, L'Shanah Tova Umesukah!

May we all be inscribed and sealed for a good and sweet year; a year of genuine and complete Redemption!