

PARASHAS NITZAVIM

You're Still Standing

We have all seen it happen. A nervous speaker steps to the podium and begins his remarks with platitudes and other matters of no great significance. Then, as he becomes more comfortable, he gets down to business. But surely this is not what we would expect from Moses, the greatest Jewish leader and prophet of all time, addressing his final words to his people on the last day of his life. And yet, how does he begin his remarks? "You are all standing here before Hashem, your Lord," he declares in this week's Torah portion. What was the significance of these words? Didn't they all realize they were standing there?

The Midrash tells us that Moses spoke these words to allay the anxieties of the Jewish people. As we read in last week's Torah portion, they had just heard a long litany of curses, a list of all the horrible misfortunes that would befall them should they stray from the path of righteousness. The situation seemed utterly hopeless. After all, they were only human, subject to periodic failings and shortcomings. Surely, at some point they would inevitably stray. And then they would face disaster. What a disheartening thought! Calamity was suspended over their heads by the flimsiest of threads, and it was only a matter of time before it would crash down and destroy them.

"You need not be concerned," Moses was telling them. "Look! After all your sins and misdeeds, you're still standing here before Hashem! Hashem may sometimes choose to punish you, but He will never destroy you."

But the question still remains: By telling the Jewish people that they need not be concerned, wasn't Moses actually defeating the entire purpose of the curses? The threat of the curses was intended to keep the people from straying, but without fear what was the good of the threat?

The commentators explain that Moses was trying to allay the Jewish people's fear of rejection; he was certainly not trying to allay their physical fear. Moses sensed that the people felt unsure of Hashem's commitment to them should they ever falter and slip into sin. The dreadful curses terrified them but did not dishearten them. They recognized the fearsome curses as a powerful deterrent, and they also accepted that, should they ever slip, they would have to suffer the consequences. But what if their sinful lapse resulted not only in

suffering but actual rejection by Hashem? That would be the ultimate calamity! The specter of hopelessness threatened to demoralize the people even as they stood on the threshold of the Promised Land, on the verge of experiencing the fulfillment of their dreams.

Moses, therefore, began his farewell address with words of comfort and reassurance. "Look, you're still standing here before Hashem! In the short time since becoming a nation, you've already sinned and rebelled, but Hashem has not rejected you."

The curses and punishments triggered by Jewish sinfulness are not the product of antipathy, vengeance and rejection. On the contrary, they are signs of divine favor, the firm chastisement of a loving Father who does not want His precious children to become estranged from Him. No matter how far they wander, Moses reassured them, the loving touch of their Father would always be with them. The hope of salvation would never be extinguished.

A young man once asked a great sage, "What is the greatest miracle Hashem has ever performed for the Jewish people? Was it the splitting of the Sea of Reeds? The crumbling of the walls of Jericho?"

"How do you define a miracle?" asked the sage.

"Anything that shows Hashem is watching over us," replied the young man.

"If so," said the sage, "the survival of the Jewish people is the greatest miracle of all time! Centuries of oppression, persecution, countless pogroms and massacres have not succeeded in annihilating our people. Even after the darkest hour of the holocaust, we have rebounded with a fresh spirit of nationhood and a renaissance of Jewish learning and awareness. Can there be a greater miracle?"

As Rosh Hashanah draws near, let us reflect with gratitude upon the bounty and goodness we have received from Hashem in the year gone by. But even if our year was less than perfect, let us keep in mind that Hashem is a loving Father who is concerned for the welfare of all His people. Adversity is not a sign of abandonment, as Moses reminded the Jewish people. It is an opportunity for personal growth, and if we use it wisely, we will surely be blessed with a good and sweet new year.