

Dvar Torah: Parshat Nitzavim & Rosh Hashana

by Benjamin Gee - Wednesday, September 25, 2019

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You are what you do.

This powerful message emerges for us from the beginning of Parshat Nitzavim which is always read close to Rosh Hashana.

Hashem declares ‘Atem Nitzavim hayom kulachem lifnei Hashem Elokeichem’ – ‘all of you are standing here this day, before the Lord your God’ and some categories of people are given: sosheichem, shifteichem, zikneichem v’shotreichem – your leaders, your tribes, your elders, your officers. And then other examples follow: your children, the women, the strangers, from the hewers of wood to the drawers of water but there is one word which does not fit into this context, it’s the term ‘shifteichem’ – ‘your tribes’ – because all the others refer to specific categories of people. Elders, officers, but what do we mean by tribes? Rashi explains that very simply, rosheichem shifteichem should be read as rosheichem l’shiveichem – which would mean the leaders of your tribes. But the trouble is, that is not what the Torah actually says!

Some of our other mefarshim (commentators) explain that actually, shevet doesn’t only mean tribe – it also means staff, the item that the leader carries and therefore it describes the leader.

It’s like ‘The crown’ which is a term used to describe a monarch because the monarch wears a crown. Similarly, ‘First Violin’ refers to the most significant person in the orchestra because they play the first violin. So to with shivteichem which can mean your staff and it refers to the people who carry that staff - those who are leaders, parents, educators, etc. If you are a leader you are a shevet because, you carry the staff in your hand, so to speak. And in English, we refer to the staff as being those who are the ‘doers’ in a particular capacity.

Hashem wants to convey to us that the essence of what we are is not a title, it’s not how people describe us, but rather it’s what we do that matters.

We find this expressed in the Shema, the essence of course, is a statement of the depth of our faith in the Almighty. But the Shema altogether has 248 words, as a symbol of the 248 positive commandments and the 248 limbs of the body – showing that the expression of our belief must be found in our actions.

In Anim Zemirot, which we all love to sing or to hear, we have a beautiful line: ‘dimo otcha v’lo kfi yeshcha’. This is the way of the Almighty and the same applies to people. ‘Dimu otcha’ - when we imagine you and evaluate you, ‘v’lo kfi yeshcha’ - it is not according to your essence or your title, ‘vayeshavucha’ the value we attach to you, ‘lfi ma’asecha’ according to what you do. Hashem is great because of his actions, what he does for us. And we can only attain greatness, not through titles or positions but rather through our deeds.

As we approach the High Holy Days, let's take advantage of these Days of Awe to change ourselves and in that way change the world around us. The way to do it is through action.

From Parshat Nitzavim we learn that it is the actions that count - you are what you do.

Shabbat Shalom and shana tova.

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