

Why Does a Jew Need Other Jews?

Shalosh Seudos Drush - Parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5786

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

Earlier today, we read the opening words of Parshas Nitzavim:

אַתֶּם נִצָּבִים הַיּוֹם בְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם

"You are standing firmly today, all of you, before Hashem your God." The Torah then identifies everyone who was present: "Your leaders, your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel; your children, your wives, the stranger in your camp, from the woodchopper to the water-carrier."

There is an obvious question. Once the Torah has said בְּלָכֶם - all of you - why must it continue with the entire list? "All of you" already includes the leaders, the elders, the children and the water-carriers. Furthermore, why does the Torah say נִצָּבִים, which means standing firmly and securely? It could simply have said עומדים - you are standing here today. What gives the Jewish people the strength not merely to stand, but to remain firmly standing?

The Midrash answers with the familiar comparison to a bundle of reeds. A single reed can easily be broken, even by a child. But when many reeds are tied together into one bundle, even a strong person cannot break them. Hashem therefore tells the Jewish people: If you stand together, no one will be able to break you. The word בְּלָכֶם is not merely telling us who was present. It is explaining how they were נִצָּבִים. How can you remain standing firmly? Only when you are בְּלָכֶם - when you are bound together with the rest of Klal Yisrael.

But Rav Eliyahu Wolf, in Me'at Min Ha'Or, asks a much more fundamental question about the Midrash itself. Why should one Jew need another Jew in order to remain unbroken?

A single Jew is not merely a fragile reed. Every Jew possesses a neshamah that is a חֵלֶק אֱלֹהִים מִמַּעַל, a portion of Godliness from Above. The Jew is connected to the Creator of the world. Our pasuk itself says that he is standing לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם - before Hashem. If a Jew is standing with Hashem, what force in the world can possibly break him? Why should he require the protection of other people? Is being connected to Hashem not enough?

In fact, the question becomes even stronger. If one Jew who possesses a Godly neshamah can be broken, how does placing him together with other human beings solve the problem? Why should ten fragile reeds be stronger than one Jew who stands with Hashem? It is Hashem Who protects a person. What can another person add to that protection?

Rav Wolf answers that, in truth, no outside force possesses the power to break a Jew who remains fully connected to Hashem. Neither the nations of the world, nor the pressures of life, nor even the yetzer hara can destroy the essential strength of a Jewish neshamah. The Jewish soul draws its power from Hashem, and that power cannot be broken from the outside.

A person becomes vulnerable only when he first develops a small crack within himself. Something begins to weaken in his relationship with Hashem. He becomes distracted, discouraged, resentful, complacent or isolated. The crack may initially be almost invisible. But through that small opening, outside forces can begin to enter. The yetzer hara did not create the original break. It could only gain access because a small fissure had already developed.

This is why the Jew needs the agudah. The other Jews do not protect him instead of Hashem. They help him repair the crack that is preventing him from living with the protection and strength Hashem has already placed within him. The agudah surrounds the weakened place. The strength of the other reeds lies alongside his crack until it can be repaired and he can once again stand with his own true strength.

This is a very different understanding of achdus. We do not need one another because a Jew's neshamah is intrinsically weak. We need one another because even a tremendously strong Jew may not notice when a small crack is beginning to separate him from the Source of his strength. Another person can sometimes see what we cannot see within ourselves. A close friend can notice the change in our davening, our learning, our attitude or our presence long before we recognize it ourselves.

The first crack is rarely a dramatic rebellion against Hashem. It can begin with something quite small. A man misses one shiur and then another. Someone is hurt by a remark or by not receiving an honour and begins to withdraw from the shul. A person finds that his davening has become mechanical, but he is too tired to address it. Someone stops sitting with the chevra at Kiddush or Shalosh Seudos. A regular seat is empty for two Shabbosos. No catastrophe has occurred, but something is beginning to loosen.

If that person remains a קנה יחיד, an isolated reed, the crack can grow unnoticed. But if he is part of an agudah, somebody notices. Someone telephones and says, "We missed you." A friend says, "You used to come to the shiur - come and sit with me this week." Someone quietly asks, "You don't seem like yourself. Is everything all right?" That friend has not replaced Hashem. He has helped remove something that was preventing the person from feeling close to Hashem.

Rav Wolf explains that there are two very different conditions that can produce these spiritual cracks. In the verses of Shofaros that we will recite next week, Yeshayah speaks about הַאֲבָדִים בְּאֶרֶץ אַשּׁוּר וְהַנִּדְחִים בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם - those who are lost in the land of Ashur and those who have been driven away in the land of Mitzrayim.

Mitzrayim represents מִצְרִים, constriction and pressure. Every congregation deals with these pressures constantly. A man's wife becomes ill and suddenly his entire world revolves around appointments, treatments and uncertainty. Someone is worried about a child or struggling financially. An older member can no longer drive and gradually stops coming. Someone loses a spouse and returns after Shabbos to an empty home. A family problem occupies a person's thoughts so completely that he can barely concentrate on a word of davening.

The illness, the financial difficulty and the family problem are not themselves the spiritual crack. A person is not at fault because he is suffering. The crack

begins when the pain leaves him feeling isolated from Hashem and from everyone around him. He begins to believe that nobody understands, that his tefillos do not matter, or that there is no point in coming to shul when his mind is elsewhere. The pressure of Mitzrayim begins to separate him from the very Source of strength that he needs most.

At that moment, the agudah must surround him. The chevra may not be able to cure the illness or solve the family problem, but it can prevent the difficulty from becoming spiritual isolation as well. Someone offers a ride. Someone saves him a seat. Someone invites him for a meal, brings food to his home or learns with him. We cannot always remove a person's Mitzrayim, but we can make certain that Mitzrayim does not convince him that he has been abandoned.

Ashur represents the opposite danger. The word Ashur is connected homiletically with osher - prosperity and success. This person is not constricted at all. His business is flourishing. His calendar is full. He is respected, capable and self-sufficient. He does not appear to need anything from anyone.

But success can also create a fissure in a person's relationship with Hashem. A man becomes so busy that he no longer has time for a regular shiur. He begins to feel that his success is entirely the product of his own wisdom and effort. He comes to shul but leaves before anyone can speak to him. He becomes so self-contained that nobody knows what is happening within him. Nothing has collapsed, but he has stopped growing.

The person in Mitzrayim often knows that he is in trouble. The person in Ashur may believe that everything is wonderful. That is why Yeshayah calls him an אִיֵּד - someone who is lost. He does not even recognize how far he has wandered. The cracks of hardship cause a person to cry out. The cracks of prosperity can convince him that he no longer needs to cry out to Hashem at all.

He also needs the agudah. He needs a real friend who can ask, "What happened to your learning?" Someone who can say, "We used to see you at the shiur," or, "You are accomplishing so much in business, but what are you doing for your neshamah?" Not as a policeman and not as a critic, but as someone who cares enough not to allow a friend to drift unnoticed.

Covering another person's crack does not mean covering up inappropriate behaviour or pretending that everything is fine. Sometimes friendship requires an honest conversation. But correction sounds entirely different when it comes from someone who has first demonstrated that he is willing to carry us. Before a person can speak to the crack, he must show that he loves the reed.

This is why Shabbos is so essential. Shabbos is the cord that takes many separate reeds and binds them into one agudah.

During the week, each person is pulled into his own world. One man is an employer and another is an employee. One is flourishing while another is frightened. Our telephones, businesses, appointments and responsibilities divide us into separate lives. Even when we care about one another, the speed of the week makes it difficult to stop long enough to notice what is happening to someone else.

Then Shabbos arrives. The telephone is put away. Business stops. Nobody is rushing to another appointment or trying to close another deal. We walk the same streets, enter the same shul, open the same siddur and listen to the same Torah. One person recites Kaddish and everyone else supports his words by answering Amen. One person leads the davening, another reads the Torah, another begins a niggun and everyone joins him.

Shabbos reconnects the Jew in two directions simultaneously. It reconnects him upward to Hashem, and it reconnects him outward to other Jews. Those two connections are not competing with one another. They strengthen each other. The chevra helps the individual stand before Hashem, and standing together before Hashem transforms a collection of individuals into an agudah.

Shabbos does not make us identical. It binds our different strengths together. One person brings Torah. Another brings warmth. Someone notices who is missing. Someone sees the man standing alone and draws him into the conversation. One provides the meal, another provides the singing, and another may provide nothing more than his quiet presence. But that presence may be precisely what someone else needs in order to feel that he still belongs.

There are Shabbosos when a person does not possess the strength to carry Shabbos alone. His concentration is gone. His home is too quiet. His worries have followed him into shul. On those Shabbosos, the minyan carries his tefillah. The singing carries his spirit. The table carries his loneliness. The chevra surrounds the small crack until he can again experience his own connection to Hashem.

Shalosh Seudos may be the clearest expression of this idea. The meal is simple. The day is beginning to fade. The pressures and distinctions of the week have fallen away. We are not merely individuals sitting in rows. We are a chevra sitting together around one table. This gathering is not only the setting for this drush. It is the subject of the drush. This is **אִתָּם וְצָבִים הַיּוֹם כָּלְכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם** taking place before our eyes.

In exactly one week, we will stand before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah. None of us will arrive without some small crack. Some will come with the visible pressure of Mitzrayim - with illness, loneliness, financial worries or family difficulties. Others will come with the hidden danger of Ashur - with comfort, distraction, complacency or the illusion that we no longer need anyone else.

We should not imagine that the congregation will stand between us and Hashem. The congregation's task is to help each of us stand once again before Hashem. The agudah does not supply a substitute for the strength of the neshamah. It helps close the fissure so that the neshamah can again draw strength from its true Source.

We should therefore not leave Shalosh Seudos with only a general commitment to "achdus." We should look around this room. Who would normally be here but is missing? Who is here every week but rarely becomes part of the conversation? Who has experienced a difficult period? Who appears completely successful but has quietly withdrawn from learning or from the chevra? Before Rosh Hashanah, each of us can make one telephone call, extend one invitation or renew one connection.

And perhaps there is a second, more difficult question: Whom do I allow close enough to notice my crack? It is much easier to offer help than to admit that we need help. But a reed cannot benefit from the bundle while insisting upon remaining separate from it. Each of us must have at least one person who can ask us an honest question and receive an honest answer.

Let me conclude with the remarkable story of Dr. Edith Eger, the Auschwitz survivor and psychologist who passed away only a few months ago at the age of ninety-eight. When she was sixteen, Dr. Mengele forced her to dance for his entertainment. When she finished, he gave her a loaf of bread. She was starving, but she did not keep the bread for herself. She divided it and shared it with the other girls.

Near the war's end, Edith and the other prisoners were forced on a death march from Mauthausen toward Gunskirchen. They were skeletal from hunger and exhaustion. Anyone who fell behind could be shot. Edith reached the point at which her legs could no longer carry her. She began to collapse.

Then she felt herself being lifted. The very girls with whom she had shared her bread locked their arms together beneath her, formed a human chair and carried her forward. The bread she had placed into their hands returned to her as the arms that saved her life.

Those girls did not give Edith a new body. They did not end the march or remove the danger. They surrounded the place where her strength had failed and carried her until she could reach life again.

When Edith divided that loaf, she thought that she was giving away a few pieces of bread. She could not possibly have known that she was binding together an agudah. She had covered their hunger. When her own strength cracked, they closed their arms around the crack and carried her.

We are also sitting together today over bread. We do not know what chair we may be building through a telephone call, an invitation, a chavrusa, a shared song or a place at our table. We do not know which person may one day need to be carried - or when we ourselves will need the arms of the chevra beneath us.

אֶתֶּם וְצָרִים הַיּוֹם גָּלְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם does not teach that a Jew standing with Hashem is weak. A Jew who is truly standing with Hashem cannot be broken. It teaches that when a crack begins separating a Jew from the strength Hashem placed within him, גָּלְתֶּם must close around that crack.

When one of us can no longer stand before Hashem, the rest of us do not stand instead of him. We hold him until he can stand before Hashem again.

Story source: Recorded testimony of Dr. Edith Eva Eger, USC Shoah Foundation.