"You are standing this day, all of you, before God, your Lord: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all the men of Israel." Devarim 29:9

The purpose of the curses was to awaken the fear of Hashem in the hearts of Israel. Why then did Moshe start to appease and thus weaken the effect of the curses on Bnei Yisrael?

Sefer Kehillas Yitzchak notes that proper rebuke is only effective when delivered in a thought-out and delicate manner. The one who delivers words of criticism must consider to whom he is speaking in order to tailor his message to his audience. When speaking to a simpleton, strong and harsh words are appropriate as they make an impact even upon his limited understanding. When addressing a more refined group, in respecting their intelligence, rebuke must be couched in a clear and direct, yet subtle, fashion.

Bnei Yisrael consisted of people who were of significant intelligence and a well-developed understanding of ethical behavior. When Moshe Rabbeinu delivered his message of rebuke, it seems as if a softer manner of expression would have been adequate. Yet, the "ותנתקו" contained ninety-eight openly harsh threats. The people were offended and insulted, not only by the content of the admonition but even more so by the manner in which it was delivered. They were horrified at being addressed as if they were of a low stature. They became embarrassed, questioning: “Have we gone from such a high level to such a low level that the only way to arouse us is with curses and physical punishments?”

Therefore, Moshe started to appease them, saying, “These curses are being said not only with you in mind, for ‘you are standing this day, all of you, before God your Lord’. You stand at a very lofty level and are close to Hashem. Nevertheless, you are not standing here alone. These curses are also designed for the generations to come, for they are the ones who may need such rebuke, for they will not be on such a high level.”

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WITHIN OUR REACH

Ksav Sofer points out that there are two distinct possibilities regarding the timing of our ultimate redemption and the arrival of the Mashiach. One is a hidden time, of which no one is aware. It is an unknown moment, to which even Moshe Rabbeinu, the master of all prophets, was not privy. Yet, there is another aspect of the timing of the arrival of the Mashiach, and that is revealed to all. The verse (Tehillim 95:7) states that “we are the people of His pasture, and the flock of His hand, even today, if you only hearken to His voice”. This means that if we hearken to Hashem’s voice He will restore us as His people and redeem us from exile.

When Moshe prophesied about the future exile, he forecasted that the nation “would be cast into another land, as it is this day”. Moshe did not know when they would be redeemed and when the end of their travails would come, for the limit of it all is known only to Hashem. The verse, therefore, continues and...
proclaims that “the secret things belong to God”, for only He knows of the hidden moment of redemption, and it has not been revealed to any prophet. Yet, “that which is revealed”, meaning the timing element of which we are aware, “are for us and our children forever”. This opportunity is dependent upon us “to carry out all the words of the Torah”. It is within our hands to bring the redemption closer today, as the verse (Tehillim 95:7) teaches: “Even today, if you only hearken to His voice.”

THE CENTRALITY OF SHABBOS

Chid”a points out that the letters of the word "משב" are also those of the word "משפ“. This is an indication that proper teshuvah for any mitzvah cannot be achieved without proper fulfillment of the mitzvah of Shabbos. We find an elaboration of this theme in Da’as Chochmah (Shevuos 20b):

When a person sins, he introduces into his being a degree of impurity. This affects his entire self, both the deepest recesses of his heart and mind and his external appearance. When he does teshuvah, through his regret and his crying to God, he ignites a spark of holiness within himself. He must yearn for the Shechinah, however, which can cleanse him of the pockets of internal impurities which have infiltrated. Then he must strive to perform groups of mitzvos, particularly with the limbs which were involved in his original sin. These mitzvos will bring many angels which will exorcise the impurities that have ruined his appearance and brought about his being seen as a sinner. These two efforts are only achieved with the observance of the Shabbos, for this is when we can link up with the Shechinah. The person must still involve himself in the appropriate mitzvos, and hopefully he will merit to succeed.

One who observes Shabbos properly is considered as if he is involved with groups of mitzvos, as the Shabbos corresponds to all the mitzvos. One cannot adequately do teshuvah unless Shabbos observance is an essential part of his religious commitment. With this in mind, one can use the Shabbos as a cornerstone of his approach to teshuvah, and his efforts are sure to be well accepted before God. This is the message of the letters of the word "משב" being the same as those of the word “משפ“, for these two are mutually interdependent.

LEVELS OF TESHUVAH

The Torah portion of Nitzavim is always read before Rosh Hashanah, a fitting time to speak about reflection and repentance. Often we have a strong desire to make changes in our lives. We want to be better parents, better spouses, and better people. We aspire to greater spirituality in our lives, to devote more time to Torah study, to be more thoughtful in our interpersonal relationships. And yet, circumstances may make such resolutions very difficult to keep. Our goals may seem unattainable, and our personality faults beyond correction.

The Torah describes the national teshuvah of the Jewish people as they return to their homeland and their faith: “Among the nations where God, your Lord, has banished you, you will reflect on the situation. Then you will return up to ( prol) God, your Lord...He will gather you from among the nations...and bring you to the land that your ancestors possessed...God will remove the barriers from your hearts...and you will repent and obey God, keeping all of His commandments...For you will return to ( prol) God, your Lord, with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Sefer Oros HaTeshuvah points out that twice the verses state that “you will return to God”. Is there a purpose to this repetition? A careful reading reveals a slight discrepancy between the two phrases. After reflection in the exile, the Jewish people will return to the land of their fathers. Here the Torah says: “You will return up to God“, using the Hebrew word “ prol”. After returning to the Land of Israel, and when God removes the barriers of their hearts, they will learn to fully love God and keep His commandments. This time the Torah says: “You will return to God”, using the preposition “ prol”. How do these two forms of national return differ? What is the difference between “ prol” and “ prol”? The first teshuvah is a physical return to their homeland, to the language, and
to their national essence. This is returning “up to God” - approaching but not fully attaining. Thus the Torah uses the preposition לְהַוָּדָד (לְהַוָּדָד וּלְהַוָּדָד כָּלִיל), a Talmudic expression, indicating a state of “up to, but not included in the category” This is a genuine yet incomplete repentance, obscured by many veils.

After this initial return, the Jewish people will merit divine assistance that “will remove the barriers from your hearts”. This will enable the people to achieve the second stage of return, a full, complete teshuvah all the way “to God”. This is an all-embracing return to God “with all your heart and soul”.

It is important to recognize and appreciate these different levels of teshuvah. This lesson is also true on a personal level. We should value even partial efforts to change and improve. Chazal praised even רַעְשֹׂב, the mere desire to improve (Pesikta Rabbati 44). Perhaps we are unable to fulfill our spiritual aspirations to the extent that we would like. Nonetheless, we should view our desire to change and improve as tools that purify and sanctify, leading us on our way to attaining complete spiritual elevation.

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IT IS WITHIN OUR REALM

Doing mitzvos involves both the physical act of performing the mitzvah and the intentions and understanding that go through the mind of the one who fulfills the mitzvah. **Kli Yakar** points out that the truth is that the mysteries regarding the mitzvos are truly lofty and are beyond the reach of the non-Jew. However, these concepts have been revealed to the Sages and are part of the oral traditions. This is indicated in Tehillim (147:19-20), “He has given His words to Yaakov, His laws and statutes to Yisrael, and has done the same to no other nation.” One might have thought that the conceptual framework is still in the Heavens, and for this reason the Torah says that the Torah “is not in the Heavens”, and is “not beyond you”. The word “you” is meant to exclude the nations, for it is indeed beyond them. That “it is not distant” refers to the performance of the mitzvos, for Hashem never commanded us to go to the far ends of the world to achieve the mitzvos. He has only commanded us to do that which is within our ready ability to perform.

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A COMMUNAL AND PERSONAL MESSAGE

Yehoshua was given the words of encouragement יָרֵאָה יָד בְּרֵאשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל - “be strong and of good courage” - twice in this parashah, the first time by Moshe and the second by Hashem. Moshe also told Yehoshua that he will go with the people into the land, while Hashem told him that he will indeed lead the people into the land. What we are seeing here is the first, and surely the most difficult, change of command in the history of the Jewish people. As the Torah states: יָרֵאָה יָד בְּרֵאשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל - “And there has not risen a prophet since in Israel like Moshe.” (Devarim 34:10)

What might Yehoshua have been thinking? **Sefer Yad Yechezkel** explains that most likely it was how unworthy he was, compared to his predecessor. Thus, Moshe, as well as Hashem, needed to give Yehoshua encouragement. What did Moshe say? As the **Malbim** relates, Moshe praised Yehoshua in front of the nation. He brought him out and said “Future leader of the Jewish people, go with this nation into the Land of Israel. Know that your leadership is not needed for that, for Hashem has promised it to our forefathers. Be strong in Torah – and even stronger in deed (Brachos 32a) – for the division of the land is to be done through you.” Moshe detailed the mission of Yehoshua in front of all the people so that they would know without a doubt who would be the leader and what he was to accomplish.

When Hashem spoke to Yehoshua it was quite different. This was a personal conversation between Hashem and Yehoshua, and not intended for the ears of the
rest of the people. Even Moshe Rabbeinu was not aware of these words. As Rabbi Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains, the verse might have been promised the land, but God tells Yehoshua, “You have direct command to bring the people into the land...and at all times you must demand the command of the whole nation.” Therefore, again, it was necessary to encourage Yehoshua to be strong in his own learning and observance of mitzvos. For to be a true leader in Klal Yisrael one must show a love for learning Torah and be meticulous in the performance of mitzvos as well. For, as explained in the Kli Yakar, Klal Yisrael is aware when their leaders do not practice what they preach.

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IT IS NOT SO EASY

Our sages teach us (Sotah 35a) that David HaMelech was called to account for referring to the Torah and its teachings as “songs”, when he said (Tehillim 119:54): “Your statutes were as music to me in the house of my dwelling.” As a result of this indiscretion, he mistakenly ruled that the Ark, which was being returned by the Plishtim, should be transported by wagon. This indirectly led to the untimely and tragic death of Uzza (Shmuel 6:6), which marred the celebration of the return of the Ark. Let us try to understand the “measure-for-measure” response in this situation.

Sefer Tiferes Yonasan cites the Gemara (Megillah 7b), which clearly states: “The only method to acquire Torah is through toil and by expending effort. When David HaMelech referred to Torah as a song, this seemed to suggest that the study of Torah was inherently a pleasant and easy pursuit. The outcome of this was that he later instructed that the Ark of the Torah be transported on a wagon. When an ox pulls a wagon, this is a method which requires little or no effort on the part of man. The truth is, however, that the Torah specifically commands (BeMidbar 7:9) that the Ark be transported by the Levi'im “on their shoulders”. This symbolizes that there are no shortcuts or convenient bypasses when it comes to growth in Torah.

We must be prepared to “shoulder the burden” and take on the task.

Our verse indicates this message, as well. After recording the Torah, Moshe presented it to the Levi'im. Why were they designated as the representatives of the nation to receive the Torah? It is because “they were the carriers of the Ark of the Covenant”. They personally carried the Ark upon their shoulders, and they appreciated the necessary effort.

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TO EDUCATE AND DEMONSTRATE

The momentous event of “הכשת – the gathering of the entire nation” to hear the king read from Sefer Devaram – was designed to create a deep impact upon all who attended. All parents were commanded to bring their children to this convention, and the hearts of all participants, especially the youth, were moved by the overwhelming experience they attended. The verse speaks of the “children who do not know”. Precisely because the children did not understand nor comprehend the meaning of the Torah reading which the king performed, their imaginations were primed to absorb the full excitement of the event.

Malbim explains that the verse continues to relate that the children would benefit by “learning to listen and to fear”. The experience became embedded deep within the memory of the children, and the impressions of seeing so many adults coming together to honor the Torah provided these children with a foundation of respect and awe for Torah. These young minds witnessed as the adults stood for hours, totally devoted to listening to the words of Torah being read by the king. By watching their parents’ commitment to the king and his rendition of the Torah, the children internalized the dedication to Torah which their parents demonstrated. Furthermore, the actions of the king himself set an example for these tender souls.
Despite his mighty stature, the king personally read the Torah, thus portraying an impression of the paramount importance of the study of Torah for the entire nation. This tangible aura of awe and trepidation for the honor of the Shechina could be felt among the huge assembly, and the children were sure to be impressed by all these aspects of this assembly.

### Halachic Corner

**Pirkei Avos Chapter 5-6**

**Zmanim for Parshas Nitzavim-Vayelech 5780**

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On Rosh HaShanah, the dual functions of festival and Day of Judgment are reflected in halachah. The Shulchan Aruch states that nice clothes must be worn to show our confidence that Hashem will judge us favorably. However, they must not be too elegant, for that would detract from the aura of awe and fear of judgment. Although some authorities permitted penitential fasting on Rosh HaShanah, the accepted halachah forbids fasting (see Nechemiah 8). Special foods are prepared as a sign for a good year or because their names have a good connotation. Thus, it is customary to eat dates, pumpkin, pomegranate, beets, carrots, apples and honey. The appropriate “Y’hi ratzon” for each is found in certain machzorim.

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**Questions for Thought and Study**

1. How were Bnei Yisrael allowed to accept the תור (covenant) for future generations? See Ohr HaChaim 29:15-16
2. How can we say that Moshe completely fulfilled his 120 years when he really should have lived to enter Eretz Yisrael and to live forever? (see Rashi BeMidbar 23:13)?
3. Moshe had already called on “heaven and earth to bear witness” in Pasuk 4:26. Why did he need to do it again in Pasuk 32:19? See Rambam 30:15
4. Which mitzvah of all of the mitzvos in the Torah is considered an attainment of perfection? See Ohr HaChaim 30:20
5. In what way are Esther and Haman alluded to in Parshas Vayelech? See Ba’al HaTurim 31:17

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Answers:

1. One is allowed to make an acquisition for someone else if it will be good for that person, as we learn, "there is a permitted way to "acquire." Moshe describes in 29:15-16 how the אכילה would be beneficial for future generations, so that the current generation can "acquire" this benefit for future generations.

2. Moshe was supposed to receive as an extra reward the ability to enter Eretz Yisrael and live forever. Due to the sin of the אכילה ("bitter waters"), he lost the extra reward and was only given his present number of complete years.

3. Moshe considered this covenant the beginning and end of an agreement, so he felt it should be "signed" at the beginning and end, like any other legal document.

4. Living in Eretz Yisrael is considered to be the attainment of perfection and it encompasses the entire Torah, as, according to Ramban on Vayikra 18:25, one does not completely fulfill the mitzvos until they are done in Eretz Yisrael.

5. The pasuk says "I will hide my face and they will become prey." The first word alludes to (esther), who is "hidden" in the Torah. The last word numerically equals the word (Hamann).

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