

Parshas VoEschanan – Mark Neuberger *(reprinted)*

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“When you give birth to children and grandchildren and you will have become old in the land and you will become corrupt and make for yourselves a statue of some image and you will do evil in the eyes of Hashem to anger Him. I appoint heaven and earth to bear witness against you this day that you will surely perish quickly from the land to which you are crossing the River Jordan to possess, you will not prolong your days upon it but you shall be utterly destroyed.” (Devorim 4:25-26)

Twice in one week we read these possukim from the Sedra Vaeshchanan, but what a contrast there is between the two occasions when we read this dire prophecy. The first time is on Tisha B'av morning. We are sitting on low chairs, wearing plimsolls and facing a long day of Kinos, fasting and mourning. The second time we are in Shabbos clothes, about to begin the Shivo Denechemto, the seven Haftoros of Comfort, and looking forward to Elul and the Yomim Noroim, a time of Teshuva and coming closer to Hakodosh Boruch Hu.

What was the warning that Moshe Rabbeinu was giving the Bnei Yisroel at the end of his life? When you enter into Eretz Yisroel and you settle there, you will have children and grandchildren, you will become secure and prosperous and then you will forget Hakodosh Boruch Hu and start the downward spiral into idol worship. What will be the trigger for this descent? The possuk uses the words “Venoshantem Bo'oretz -and you become old in the land.”

Reb Shimshon Refoel Hirsch points out that the word “Venoshantem,” is different from the usual work “Zokein,” normally used to imply growing old. Zokein is old in years, Venoshantem comes from the root yoshon meaning old in the sense of no longer fresh. It is closely connected to “Shainoh” meaning sleepy and worn out. This is the danger that Moshe Rabbeinu feared. You will settle into Eretz Yisroel with great enthusiasm to serve Hashem but then time will pass, life will become easier and this energy will wear off. It is significant that the daily Tomid sacrifice is “Kevosim Bnei Shonoh – two male lambs of one year old.” Why such young animals? To remind us on a daily basis, to retain our youthful enthusiasm when we serve Hashem.

How can we then avoid the syndrome of “Venoshantem?” How can we keep our Avodas Hashem fresh and enthusiastic so much so that we are brought back to Eretz Yisroel? The answer lies in the very first words that Hashem told Yehoshua just before he led the Bnei Yisroel into Eretz Yisroel. “The words of this Torah shall not depart from your mouths and you shall meditate on it day and night so that you may observe and practise all that is written in it.” (Yehoshua 1:8) Learning Torah day and night whenever we have the opportunity, finding new understandings and insights into the mitzvos, this is what will prevent our Avodas Hashem becoming stale.

It is surely not a coincidence that in the week following Voeschanan, we celebrate the Festival of the 15th of Av. The Gemoroh at the end of Meseches Taanis tells us that there were no greater Yomim Tovim for the Bnei Yisroel than Yom Kippur when we achieve atonement for our sins and the 15th of Av. Why the 15th of Av? Amongst other reasons, because on that day, the nights start to become longer leaving us more time to study the Torah. By learning Torah enthusiastically we will avoid “becoming old” in our serving of Hakodosh Boruch Hu. Then He will hopefully fulfil the words at the end of the Parsha, “you will prolong your days upon the land which Hashem has given to you all your days.”

Lilui Nishmas, my Father, Hechover, Reb Yitzchok ben Hechover Reb Shimon z”l.

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