

## PARSHAS VAESCHANAN - JONATHAN GERSHLICK

In the middle of the first section of this week's Leining is the Passuk (Devarim 4:4) that we say as the Kohen is called up to the Torah: "**V'atem Had'vekim Ba'Hashem Elokechem, Chayim Kulechem Hayom – And you who cling to HaShem, your G-d - you are all alive today.**"

This Passuk is also part of the final heartfelt plea that we make at the end of both the Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur Mussaf Tefillah, (just before HaYom T'amtzenu).

Why is the Passuk included at the climax of the Yamim Noraim Tefillah? Why do we say it at the start of Kriat HaTorah? And why is the concept of "D'vekut – Clinging to HaShem" so important?

D'vekut is a concept central to Jewish life. Although it is not a tangible Mitzvah, D'vekut applies 24-7, not just when we are doing specific individual Mitzvot, but it is also the focal point for how we spend the rest of our time as well.

Practically, when we respond to the Gabbay's call-up of the Kohen with the familiar refrain of "V'atem Had'vekim...", we are giving a blessing of D'vekut to all those who are called up to the Torah and are loyal to it. Chief Rabbi Sacks famously calls<sup>1</sup> the Torah the "portable Homeland of the Jewish People". It is only because of our love of the Torah that the Jewish nation, small in number, has survived a 2,000-year Exile.

Similarly, with "V'atem Had'vekim..." following straight on from the Gabbay's: "Baruch Shenatan Torah l'Amo Yisrael Bik'dushato – Blessed is the One who in His Holiness gave the Torah to His People Israel", we are praising HaShem as the One who keeps alive all who keep the Torah and are obedient to G-d.

The Baal HaTanya asks how can a normal person actually cleave to G-d and survive? If someone gets too close to HaShem, he cannot live, just like someone cannot stand too near a Fire. The Baal HaTanya cites the start of the first Brachah before the Shacharit Sh'ma, where we praise HaShem's power to create light and darkness and His ability to make "peace" between the two, even though light and darkness cannot apparently co-exist at the same time!

Similarly, the Tanya explains that only through Torah can the Jewish people cling to G-d. Water is allegorically akin to the Torah and is the substance that allows a person to survive an encounter with fire, (even though water cannot actually "cling" to fire). Likewise, acquisition of Torah knowledge (water) allows a person to cling to G-d (fire), even though such a co-existence ought to be impossible.

Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch says that D'vekut expresses the idea of the closest attachment to someone else that one can have. His proof is the Passuk found in Bereishit 2:24: "**... a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife – "...V'davak b'ishto**". He says it is not possible to "cling" and also have even the slightest aversion to someone. R Hirsch explains that this is why the Passuk on D'vekut comes straight after Moshe Rabbeinu's reminder to Bnei Yisrael of the Baal Peor incident. Anyone who was even slightly guilty of association with Baal Peor was killed in the subsequent plague, and so Moshe is pointing out to every member of B'nei Yisrael (V'atem is plural, just like Eineichem - "your eyes" in the Passuk about Baal Peor) that they owed their existence today to their immutable faithfulness in G-d and this was the strongest proof of the consequence and value of obedience to G-d.

Similarly, at the end of the Mussaf of the Yamim Noraim, we conclude our Tefillah with a final plea to G-d that we are deserving of His Rachamim. And in the words "V'atem Had'vekim...", we once again affirm our allegiance to G-d and the Torah, acknowledging that this is the best hope for us and all the Jewish People.

<sup>1</sup> Remarks recorded to mark the launch in 2006 of the new Siddur.