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Date: 9/19/2003 5:55:44 AM
Subject: Netvort : parshas Netzovim-Vayeilech, 5763

Pathways

By Rabbi Joshua (blazingly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In memory of Rabbi Naphtoli ben Yitzchok Isaac Kelman, an early student and musmach of Yeshiva Torah Vodaas in Brooklyn, who passed away on Shabbos, the ninth of Elul, in Detroit. May his memory be a blessing.

In this week's parsha, God tells Moshe of his imminent death, and informs him that the people will eventually go astray, worship false gods, and need to be punished as a result. He tells Moshe, "Behold you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will rise up and stray after the gods of that which is foreign to this land, etc.....My anger will flare against it on that day.....and many evils and distresses will encounter it..... For I shall bring them to the land that I swore to their forefathers.....but they will eat, be sated, and grow fat, and turn to the gods of others.....for I know its inclination, what it does today, before I bring them to the land that I have sworn." (Devorim 31:16-17, 20-21). One may ask, how can God tell Moshe with such certainty that the people will sin, and have him record this in the Torah? Doesn't this seem to work against the people's ability to exercise their free will in life?

Rabbi Boruch Sorotzkin, in his commentary HaBinah VeHaBeracha, points out that Moshe, before relating to the people a prediction similar to the one God had made, told them "For I know your rebelliousness and your stiff neck ; behold ! While I am still alive with you today you have been rebels against God, and surely after my death" (Devorim 31:27). What, asks Rabbi Sorotzkin, was Moshe adding to what God had told him? Perhaps, he suggests, Moshe was telling them that they do not listen to those who rebuke them, and, therefore, they do not leave open the possibility of repenting. This point is also made by the Ramban in his commentary. This approach is reminiscent of the statement of the rabbis in the Talmud Sanhedrin, that someone who treats the rabbis with contempt is considered an apikorus, a heretic, and has no portion in the world to come. Rabbi Yosef Albo, in his Sefer Halkkarim, or Book of Principles, explains that if a person despises the rabbis he is cutting himself off from his source of enlightenment and instruction in living a Torah life, and therefore is sure to go on the wrong path in life. In a similar way, Moshe was telling the people that because they were wont to disregard those who rebuke them, they would inevitably stray off the beaten path and incur divine punishment.

Rabbi Sorotzkin also quotes the comments of Seforno to God's prediction, presenting a somewhat different approach to the issue. Seforno writes that God was berating the people for planning to enter the Holy Land in order to satiate themselves, rather than for the purpose of serving God, as God wished for them to do. Entering with such an attitude would inevitably lead to the situation that God predicted, of sin, rebellion and punishment. Rabbi Bachya Ibn Pekudah, in his Duties of the Heart, writes that a person who wishes to repent

cannot simply change each action in a direct way. People often choose a path in life that creates a process of causation, with one bad action following the other, and in order to change, they need to get off that road and change their entire approach in life. My teacher, Rav Aharon Soloveichik, zt"l, gave as an analogy an incident that he experienced while teaching in both Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchonon (RIETS) and Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, in the early 1960s. After finishing his class at the Upper Manhattan campus of RIETS, he ordered a taxi, to take him to the Brooklyn campus of Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin. However, the driver made a wrong turn, and went on to the George Washington Bridge. Rav Aharon, noticing this, told him that he was going the wrong way, and that he should turn around. However, the cab driver told him that once he went onto the bridge, he had to continue on that path until New Jersey before he could turn the car around. So too, said Rav Aharon, we sometimes take a wrong turn in life which puts us on a path of sin, and in order to change, we cannot isolate one act. Rather, we must first get off the path, and change our entire approach to life. Because God understood that the people were entering the land with the wrong intention, He predicted that they were embarking on a path that would lead to spiritual ruination, and this was the message that he imparted to Moshe before he passed away.

Next week, please God, we will be observing Rosh Hashanah, which initiates a period of time dedicated to introspection and return to God. Rav Aharon zt"l explained that the term Rosh Hashanah means, literally, the head, or the brain, of the year. The idea conveyed in this term is that just as the brain is the controlling center of the human organism, so too must the days of Rosh Hashanah serve as the coordinating center of the year. The vidui, or confession, that we say during this period is not said on Rosh Hashanah. Rather than concentrating on individual sins, we need to reconsider our path in life, and make sure that we are on a path that leads to closeness to God and consideration of our fellow man. By embarking on the right path in the beginning of the year, we can go on to correct any individual mistakes we made in the past, and attain true atonement on Yom Kippur. May we all succeed in attaining that goal, and merit a wonderful new year.

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