

Parshat Nitzavim

Individual and Nation

In our Parsha, the Book of Devarim reaches a crescendo, as the new generation, the people who eagerly await their lives in Eretz Yisrael, enter into a covenant:

"That He (God) may establish you – today – as His people, and he will be to you as a God." (29:12)

A covenant is a contractual relationship, and here, as the Wilderness generation commit themselves exclusively to God, his laws and lifestyle, God reciprocates, stating His eternal commitment to Am Yisrael. This is a momentous milestone for the Israel-God relationship.

Alongside the positive aspects of the covenant comes a frighteningly severe warning:

"lest there be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turns away this day from HaShem our G-d, to go to serve the gods of those nations; lest there should be among you a root that bears gall and wormwood; 18 and, when he hears the words of this curse, he will comfort himself inside, saying: 'I shall have peace, despite my waywardness...' 19 God will not be willing to pardon him, but then the anger of HaShem and His jealousy will be fired up against that man, and the entire curse that is written in this book shall be placed upon him; God shall wipe out his name from under heaven; 20 and God shall separate him for evil of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that is written in this book of the law. 21 And the generation to come, your children that shall rise up after you, and the foreigner that shall come from a far land, shall say, when they see the plagues of that land, and the sicknesses that God has wrought 22 that the whole land is brimstone, and salt, and a burning ... like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which God overthrew in His anger, and in His wrath; 23 All the nations shall say 'Why has God acted this way to this land? How do we explain this great anger?' 24 Then people will reply: 'Because they forsook the covenant of HaShem, the G-d of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them forth out of the land of Egypt.' (29:17-24)

The warning concerns an individual, or a group who simply don't care about Judaism. They say, 'I'll be fine! Let me live life my way, let me sin if I want to.' God isn't tolerant of this attitude. He uses the metaphor of wormwood, a parasite attacking a wholesome, robust substance. The Torah is concerned that deviant individuals will become a cancer in the body politic of Am Yisrael, sowing the seeds of betrayal of the covenant. "God will not forgive." In fact, "God will wipe out his name from under the heavens."

THE PROBLEM: INDIVIDUAL-FAMILY-TRIBE-NATION

When I tried to study this parsha, I read these pesukim through and became very confused. Who is this parsha describing? - Individual, group or nation?

Let me explain my confusion. The parsha begins by talking about (v.17) "**a man, or woman, or a family, or a tribe**" who diverge from the norm, who "turn away" from the normative commitment to God's law. We are definitely referring to a **minority grouping**, a divergent and subversive faction.

Verses 18-19 sound like we are talking specifically about an **individual** who says: "let me act according to my random desires," ignoring God.

But then, verse.20 informs us that the transgressor is an entire tribe: " God will single him out for catastrophe amongst all the **tribes** of Israel."

The confusion continues, however, as the focus shifts yet again. Passuk 21-24 seems to indicate that the catastrophe will strike the entire land or the entire nation: "23 *All the nations shall say 'Why has God acted this way to this **land**? How do we explain this great anger? ' 24 *Then people will reply: 'Because they forsook the covenant of HaShem...'* " This is a collapse of national proportions, a devastating national calamity.*

The Parsha is sending mixed messages here. Is this warning addressed to an individual or to a collective, or possibly to the nation as a whole?

THE LIMITS OF COMMUNAL RESPONSIBILITY – RASHI.

Rashi, our great commentator, demonstrates a delicate sensitivity to the tension we have raised. Is the parsha directed to the individual or the collective? He comments on the passuk that concludes the parsha. The Passuk reads:

"The "hidden" are for Hashem our God, but the "revealed" are for us and our children, for all time, to perform all the words of this Torah." (29:28)

Rashi comments:

"If you say, 'What are we to do? You punish the entire collective due to the hidden thoughts of the individual! It states, (v.17) 'Lest there is a man...' and afterwards, 'And they shall see the bombardment of that land...' (v.21) – No one knows that which is deep in the mind of another individual!' (God replies:) 'I do not punish for the "hidden" things which are "for Hashem our God." Indeed He will settle accounts with that lone individual. However, the "revealed" things are "for us and for our children" to eradicate evil from our midst, and with these, if no action is taken, the public will be punished."

Rashi makes a clear distinction between sins that emerge into the public sphere and those that remain hidden from view.

Rashi says that certainly, this parsha addresses the sins of individuals and the responsibility of the collective. There are times in which society pays the price of the sins of a lone individual, and there are times in which society is absolved of responsibility.

If a person's transgression is private - in his own mind, in the privacy of his own home - then society is not involved and is not culpable. God will take it up with that individual directly.

But if there are private individuals whose acts are publicly known, possibly causing a detrimental effect, a subversive and corrosive influence upon the surrounding community, then the "collective" is expected to take action. The penalty for inaction here is that the entire community will be held responsible. If negative influence is allowed to roam free, unrestrained and unchecked, then the entire society is to blame, and will suffer the consequences for their sin of negligence, for turning a blind eye. In this case, society as a whole will be taken to task for the sin of the individual.

Regarding our parsha, we see how the acts of the individual bring ruin upon the nation as a whole.

HIZKUNI – The Slippery Slope.

Obviously, we should wonder why the public bears responsibility for the lone individual. We know that "all Israel bear responsibility for one another," but can an entire country suffer ruin for a sinful act of a lone person? The Hizkuni claims that we are dealing with a sin of national proportions.

"Could it be that on God is furious with the entire community due to a sin of a single individual? For an answer look at the story of the Idol of Micha whose roots deepened. The entire Tribe of Dan served it, and eventually all the Ten Tribes of Israel!"

What is the story of Micha's Idol? This episode may be found in the Book of Shoftim (17-18). We read a story about a man named Micha who creates an image, an idol. He sets up a temple around it, which becomes a popular tourist attraction. After gaining some prestige, Micha's idol is adopted as an object of worship for the tribe of Dan, in Northern Israel. They build an illicit temple for it in the city of Dan. Centuries later, the same infamous site is revived by Yerovam¹ to set up his molten calf, the perennial site of Avoda Zara for the Kingdom of Israel, and the Ten Tribes. The Hizkuni's example here ably demonstrates how the invention or creation of a single individual has the capability to move beyond the strata of the lone person, or the nuclear family and tribe. The act of an individual is capable of influencing the National culture.

The Hizkuni talks of a process whereby individual influences the tribe and the tribe stimulates the entire nation to sin. Here the group, the nation, is culpable because the entire nation is guilty of sin!

"An individual can cause enormous damage and loss by influencing an entire family or Tribe." (ShaDal)

Our parsha recognizes the dangers of small things that spin out of control affecting larger spheres which would ordinarily, have seemed to be beyond their field of influence. The Hizkuni urges

¹ Hizkuni is assuming that *Pessel Michah* existed until the exile of the Ten tribes. This is a matter of dispute, some commentaries preferring to adopt the opinion that *Pessel Michah* came to an end at the start of Sefer Shmuel. To investigate this question further, see Shoftim 18:30-31 and the classic commentaries (Rashi, Ralbag, Radak) there.

us to carefully check the wayward act of every single Jew, because a person's influence can be devastating.

INTERIM SUMMARY

For Hizkuni, society bears guilt only when society itself is guilty of crime. Only when the individual seduces the collective to sin does society find itself culpable.

For Rashi however, the very awareness of a fellow Jew's sin already creates a residual guilt, an obligation to act. Even if the entire community remain absolutely pious, wholly innocent, the existence and awareness of incorrect and immoral behaviour within the community imposes a sense of guilt. Maybe this philosophy is grounded in a mystical notion of the connectedness of each and every Jew².

SEFAT EMMET – The Community stands before God

We have been discussing the interplay between individual and collective. We should note that the oscillation between person and community is inherent in the very opening words of our Parsha. Nitzavim begins by addressing "Kulchem" – everyone – but it then continues to specify sub-groups: Your leader, your tribes, judges, all men of Israel, your children, wives the stranger in your midst..." The Sefat Emet comments:

"You are standing today, everyone, before God: "Today!" – Any day, any moment in which one enters the community, (one stands before God) because the communal entity is in an ongoing and constant state of standing before God... This is the introduction to the notion of mutual responsibility – by demonstrating that the Collective is dear and special to God - that each and every Jew must take responsibility for their fellow. And just as a single sin sours the collective, so the merit of the Community helps each and every individual." (5638)

The Sefat Emet talks about the power of the community. A Jewish Community by definition stands before God at all times. Our very association with the Jewish collective gives us energy, raises us to God.

Rather than viewing the parsha solely as telling the story of the individual that "poisons" society, the Sefat Emet reads the opening lines as teaching the opposite message. It is about the positive effects of community – "Kulchem!" – Together we stand before God. Vigilance for the religious actions of wayward individuals is not the only lesson to be learned here. Rather we stress the influential positive energy of Am Yisrael, an energy that can raise the individual to gain a contact point with God. This message is reflected in Halakha too. It is on this basis that the Rambam has taught us:

"The Prayer of the Community is always heard (by God.) Even if there are sinners in the community, God never rejects the Prayer of a collective. Hence a person must join the community and not pray alone..." (Laws of Prayer 8:1)

Shabbat Shalom and Ketiva Vechatima Tova!

² In this regard, it is fascinating that the Gemara in Sanhedrin 43b suggests that this collective responsibility begins ONLY when Israel enter Eretz Yisrael. Maybe we can suggest that it is only in our land that we experience this unique aura of interconnectedness.