

All of You Stand Here Today

אתם נצבים היום כלכם -all of you stand here this day before G-d.¹

What does it mean to stand before G-d? Moses makes it clear that every

Israelite male (כל איש ישראל) along with the women, children, and

foreigners (non-Israelites) in the midst needs to be before G-d, saying

מחטב עציך עד שואב מימך -from the wood chopper to the water drawer.²

Why is this the case? וברית ה' אלקיך ובאלתו -to pass before G-d in

order to enter into a covenant with Him.³

There are quite a number of parallels between the beginning of this

week's parsha, which is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh

Hashanah, and the prayer Unetaneh Tokef. In that majestic *piyut*

(liturgical poem) the Hazzan sings וכל-באי עולם תעביר לפניך כבני מרון, "All

the people of the world pass before you (one-by-one) like a flock of

sheep." This is even broader than our Torah portion: in Parshat

Nitzavim, Israel and all associated with Israel pass before G-d, whereas

¹ Deuteronomy 29:9

² Deuteronomy 29:10

³ Deuteronomy 29:11

in the *piyut* *U'netaneh Tokef* every person in the world passes before G-d. The origin of this is the second Mishnah in tractate Rosh Hashanah which reads ⁴ בראש השנה כל באי העולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרום The one difference is that the Mishnah gives us the agency as the ones who pass before G-d, whereas *Unetaneh Tokef* says that G-d has the agency, compelling us to pass before Him.

Parshat Nitzavim on the other hand says nothing about agency. Are all of Israel their followers standing at assembly because G-d compelled them to be, out of respect for Moses, or out of their own volition to do so? Whatever the source of agency, the Israelites are there for one specific purpose: לעברך בברית, to pass before you (G-d) for the sake of covenant. Just as we are required to pass before G-d in two days, on Rosh Hashanah, so too were our ancestors required to pass before G-d before they were granted the זכות, the merit, of entering the Land of Israel.

⁴ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2

What lesson can this teach us as we are on the brink of entering the year 5779? Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, a 3rd generation Hasidic rebbe, had a radical interpretation based off this. He wrote that by standing before G-d and by looking to/turning towards Him, our ancestors were imbued with the quality of “facing” (*panim*)-just as Moses interacted with G-d *panim el panim* (face to face). The G-d we are facing is called “your G-d” (אלוקיכם); not someone else’s but YOUR G-d. Therefore, by standing together facing G-d, goodness will be poured out for Israel. By our ancestors’ turning towards G-d, G-d turned towards them and goodness was brought out for them.⁵ As John Gottman teaches, successful relationships require both members of a couple to turn towards the other, especially when in conversation. This is precisely what we are asked to do when we converse with G-d in prayer.

In conversation, notice how many times you turn towards or away from someone with your body. Nonverbal communication, which social scientists say makes up as much as 90% of our communication, demonstrates whether or not someone wants to be engaged or is truly

⁵ Kedushat Levi on Deuteronomy 29:9-based off Talmud Rosh Hashanah 34b.

disinterested and just “going through the motions.” Our ancestors sought to engage G-d no matter what their position: the woodchopper was there along with the כהן גדול, the High Priest. Because Israel was united, they merited שפע, the abundance of G-d’s blessing they would receive upon entering Israel, as well as this new ברית, or covenant with G-d. Similarly, on Rosh Hashanah, when we pass before G-d, if we turn towards Him, seeking Him out as someone with whom to engage openly in an active, loving relationship, we too shall receive blessing.

Some of us might feel this makes no sense: does G-d really respond based off our engagement with Him? Does G-d really answer our prayers? For those who have doubts about this, let us turn to the following Hasidic teaching about the Selicha, or penitential prayer, Hu Yaanenu (הוא יעננו): Said Rabbi (Simcha) Bunam: “I find among the Selihot a prayer which reads ‘May He who answered Abraham on Mount Moriah answer me.’ Had I been the author of this Selihah, I would have worded it thus, ‘May He who has answered me until now

answer me at present as well.’ There exists no person who G-d has not answered many times.”⁶

We do not always know when G-d will answer us. At the same time, we long for a relationship with The Unknowable One, and often find G-d’s presence where and when we least expect it. As we prepare to begin Rosh Hashanah, let us gather ourselves as our ancestors gathered themselves when preparing to enter the Land of Israel. In two days, we will have Jews of every stripe here along with their admirers and allies. Let us recognize that regardless of one’s background or religiosity, they too are seeking what we are seeking: a relationship with The Almighty One. We need them in order to make our community all the more complete. May we welcome one another here as we prepare to stand before G-d one-by-one awaiting the judgment of what the Jewish New Year will bring for us. לשנה טובה תכתבו ותחתימו, may we each be inscribed in the Book of Life this year.

⁶ Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning* (US, Bantam Books, 1992), p. 177.