



Rabbi Katz's Drashah for Parshiyot Netzavim-Vayeilech

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Sefer Bamidbar begins by detailing the responsibilities of the Leviim, based on which family they belonged to. In no uncertain terms, we find that Leviim from Kehat, the son of Levi, were to carry the Aron Kodesh, the holiest of the mishkan's items. And yet, despite that instruction, we find in our week's parsha that this directive was overruled: "And Moshe wrote this Torah and he gave it to the Kohanim, the sons of Levi, who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant..." (31:9).

Clearly, this moment was exceptional. For the first time in history, Moshe Rabbeinu himself completed a Sefer Torah. The significance of this event warranted the kohanim's involvement. In the words of Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, "On specially important occasions [the Aron] was carried by the priests". The only other momentous occasions for which the kohanim carried the Aron were the crossing of the Yarden into Eretz Yisrael for the first time, the circling and conquering of Yericho, and the placement of the Aron into the Holy of Holies (as per Sotah 33b. See Rav Hirsch and the Chizkuni as to why this instance was not listed there).

One outstanding difference between those situations and this one, however, is the Sefer Torah. For the kohanim to carry the Aron, which is usually reserved for the Leviim, is one thing. But this time it involved the Torah. The Torah itself represented a set of laws which were not reserved for any class exclusively. Rashi, at the end of Ki Tavo (29:3), provides an intriguing background story regarding this difficulty:

All of Israel came to Moshe and said to him 'Moshe Rabbeinu- we also stood at Sinai! We also accepted the Torah, and it was also given to us- why are you appointing your tribe over it? Someday later they'll say to us 'it was not given to you, it was given to us'. Moshe was gladdened by their words, so he therefore said 'Today, you have become a nation...' (27:9)- 'today I understood that you cling and desire Hashem'.

They felt threatened by the fact that the Sefer Torah was handed to the kohanim, despite the fact that it was to be placed in (or alongside) the Aron eventually. What is interesting, however, is that their fears were not for the present. In the moment, they did not object to the kohanim being involved, carrying the Torah momentarily. They worried about the future, lest there comes a time where their commitment or stake in the Torah be challenged. It seems to me that it was this particular element of their argument over which Moshe rejoiced. Their commitment to the future, their planning ahead, 'made them a nation'. As Rabbi Shimon explains in Pirkei Avot (2:9), "the path with which a man should cleave... is for one to have foresight of what will come" ("Roeh et hanolad").

Interestingly enough, our perspective towards the future, our aspirations for ourselves, changes who we are in the present. As Moshe's statement (on which Rashi is commenting) says, "Hashem had not given you a knowing heart, seeing eyes, or ears to hear until today" (29:3). Meaning, their entire perspective and attitude was then infused with a new sense of purpose. They cared for what they would become, not just for what they were in the moment. Once they had that vision, however, it changed who they were in the moment.

We often look at the Yamim Noraim as a reset button, and rightfully so. But to claim that we're merely resetting and trying again, hoping for a different result, would be the definition of insanity. It is our reprogramming, our re-envisioning, our new aspirations, that make worthwhile our reset button during the High Holidays.

We will say during Mussaf of Rosh hashanah, for instance, that "Hayom hazeh techilat ma'asecha", 'today is the first day of Your creation'. While, literally, it refers to the creation of the world (or Adam, more specifically), perhaps on another level it means what Moshe means here. On this day we, too, are recreated. We are recreating ourselves in line with what we anticipate or aspire to be in the coming year.

In this way, we remind ourselves of the importance of optimism and hope. Not the optimism that's used as a defense mechanism -convincing ourselves that things will get better so that we can avoid confronting our problems now- but optimism as an act of improvement. When we aspire to be better, we actually take steps to become so. When we create a plan or a vision of who we want to be in the year ahead, that image influences what we do in the present.

At the end of his life, Moshe Rabbeinu went out and spoke to the people. He explained "I am 120 years old today. I can no longer go out or come in, and Hashem told me I cannot cross this Jordan River" (31:1-2). Moshe's explanation to the Jewish people for his imminent death was not the fact that his body was frail (as Rashi comments on the pasuk), but rather that there was no mission left for him to pursue. Hashem prohibited him from moving forward, literally. Others explain, spiritually, that Moshe had reached a level of holiness which no longer left any more room for growth in the physical world. In the same -but opposite- way that we renew our commitments with optimistic foresight for the future, Moshe Rabbeinu had no future to envision. He had maxed out his ability to go forward. As opposed to "techilat ma'asecha", this was his 'sof ma'asecha'.

Rosh Hashanah is a chance to reset. But that reset should come with a hope for the future. What about ourselves do we want to look different in a year from now: What relationships do we hope are healthy? Which mitzvot do we hope we'll be doing better? What commitments to others or ourselves do we hope to have fulfilled? Because once we have a picture in mind, it's a lot easier to start drawing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Katz