

Re'eh, 5780

כי לא באתם עד עתה אל המנוחה ואל הנחלה

Strength can come from the unlikeliest of places. Someone once shared with me that during a particular period of personal darkness, he happened to walk into a gift shop, where he noticed a card whose cover read: "Life is tough. But so are you." Although the words on this simple card technically did not convey anything that he did not already know, there was something distinctly touching to him about the gentle reminder at that moment in his life that the challenges that he was experiencing were actually not unusual, and that he was naturally equipped with the inner resources to be able to fight back. He would later tell me that, as insignificant as it sounded, this reminder served a critical role for him during that period of his life and beyond. While I don't know who wrote that card, I do think it is a message that all of us -- individually and nationally -- must never forget.

As the Jewish people prepare to enter the land of Israel, Moshe teaches (12:9), "כי לא באתם עד...עתה אל המנוחה..." -- "for you have not (or, in context, will not have) yet arrived at the place of resting." On a simple textual level, the verse forbids the use of personal altars during the future period when the Tabernacle would stand in the city of Shiloh, poetically referred to as המנוחה -- "the place of resting." On a deeper level, however, perhaps this verse may be seen as a broader statement on the human condition. As human beings living in this world, we have not reached the true "place of resting," and will not do so until the arrival of Shiloh -- another name for the Messiah (see Bereishit 49:10). Until the Messianic era, the natural state of the world is not one of rest. Life is hard; for some people, extremely hard. While life undoubtedly brings opportunities for joy, love, and fulfillment, it also inevitably comes with challenges. Ever since man's banishment from Eden, we find ourselves in a world that requires assiduous efforts to survive -- physically, economically, and emotionally. This existential reality of life charges us to dig deep to find כוחות, inner strengths, to fight back and overcome.

As Jews, I don't know if we speak enough about the simple value of, in the greeting card's words, being tough. One can possess all of the magnanimous character traits in the world -- kindness, honesty, humility, etc -- but if one lacks toughness, the winds of the world will break him or her very quickly. More than resilience, "toughness" denotes an inner strength that allows a person to endure the many forms of discomfort inherent in living: the discomfort of failure. The discomfort of humiliation. The discomfort of loneliness or divorce. The discomfort of physical or mental illness. The discomfort of overcoming the Yetzer HaRa. The discomfort in the feeling that everything is falling apart in one's life. And so many more. Despite the immensity of many of these discomforts, the Almighty put us in a world of challenge in order for us to continue to move forward, maintaining a belief that there is purpose, joy, and meaning in life despite these realities. Sometimes, in the unrest of life, even the basic accomplishment of getting out of bed and putting one foot in front of the other can be the ultimate sign of strength.

The Torah places great emphasis on the need for inner strength to thrive in this world. Moshe Rabbeinu's most frequent charge to Yehoshua, "חזק ואמץ" -- "Be strong and courageous," is not just historical, but also a timeless prescription for each of us to strengthen our inner resolve. This may also be the intent of our Sages in teaching "כל תלמיד חכם שאינו קשה כברזל אינו תלמיד" -- "any Torah scholar who is not hard like iron is not a Torah scholar" (Taanit 4a). To make it in a world that is "not the place of resting," we simply cannot be too internally fragile.

Inner strength and toughness should not be confused with coarseness, abrasiveness, or arrogance. Indeed, many of the toughest people I have met are also the most gentle and humble. Nor does this value imply a negation of emotion or genuine pain -- everyone who goes through this world, no matter how tough he or she is, may have periods of burnout, breakdown, and sadness, and everyone needs support from other people at times. But toughness does imply that whenever one does experience these moments, one continues to struggle, to move forward when ready, and refuses to lose hope in the ultimate goodness that exists in the world, no matter how challenging life may sometimes be.

Toughness is manifest not only in the daily life of a Jew in this world, but also in the collective national destiny of the Jewish people. No nation has suffered more than the Jewish people; nor has any nation demonstrated the inner strength to continue moving forward, persevering in life and faith, like the Jewish people. While it would have been very easy to shut things down a long time ago, the collective Jewish nation never succumbed to the understandable negativity, cynicism, and nihilism that so often accompanies great pain. Jews have managed to love life and persevere throughout the millennia, despite the challenges, because of a deep-seated belief in Divine love and support. As this week's Haftarah describes, even the "עניה סוערה לא" -- "afflicted, storm-tossed, unconsolated one" (Isaiah 54:11), battered by the storms of this world, believes that his or her struggles are not unrecognized. Such tormented Jews recognize that a loving G-d comforts them, encourages them to keep going, and promises them "ורב שלום בניך" -- that a future of abundant peace lies in store, whether for them or for their collective descendants.

The faces and hearts of people I meet reveal the pain that this challenging time continues to inflict. Feeling depressed and afraid at times does not make someone weak. On the contrary, it gives a person the ultimate opportunity to demonstrate inner strength and resolve, by continuing to move forward despite this. As such, we must continue planning Shofar blowings for Rosh Hashanna; checking in on those who live alone; sharing our money and resources with others who are less fortunate. Those who are feeling well must make extra efforts to assist those who are not. It is precisely in these times that our efforts mean the most. Life is tough...but so are we.