



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Devarim

Sukkot I & II

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Bearing Witness To Each Other

By Aaron Lauchheimer

The new year has just begun, but I can't help but remember the prophetic wake-up call that we read just a few weeks ago.

Hashem says he will instruct *Joshua*, *Moshe's* successor, and then appears at the Tent of Meeting *בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן*, in a pillar of cloud, and proceeds to foretell the future in clear language: these people, *Bnei Yisrael*, will go astray, they will sin and do evil.

If you were expecting a fairytale ending to the book of *Devarim* and to the Torah, you're out of luck. It wasn't easy to read these words then (in *Parshat Vayeilech*), and it isn't comforting to think about it now so soon after we davened for forgiveness and said *עַל הַטָּא שֶׁחָטֵאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ*, *For the sin we committed before You*.

There is a *pasuk* toward the end of the sixth *aliyah* that jumped out at me:

וְהָיָה כִּי־תִמְצָאנָה אֹתוֹ רָעוֹת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת וְעִנְיֹת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְפָנָיו לְעֵד כִּי לֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִפִּי זֶרְעוֹ כִּי נִדְעָתִי אֶת־יָצְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה הַיּוֹם בְּטַרְם אֲבִיאֲנֹו אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי:

And the many evils and troubles befall them—then this poem shall confront them as a witness, since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring. For I know what plans they are devising even now, before I bring them into the land that I promised on oath. (Devarim 31:21)

Hashem is saying to *Moshe*, we both know that *B'nei Yisrael* is unreliable and will inevitably be led astray. But know, He says, the Torah — that is what is meant by "*this poem*" — will be a witness. The obvious question is just what is the Torah witness to, and what does witness mean in this context? Is the Torah witness to *B'nei Yisrael's* downfall, or to their ability to pick up the pieces -- or both?

Rashi provides one answer. He says that the Torah will testify against *B'nei Yisrael* and attest that Hashem warned them of all the bad things that would happen to them. This seems harsh. It's certainly not an

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answer that warms the heart. Witness for the prosecution doesn't seem to me like a suitable role for *Hashem's* Torah?

Wouldn't *Hashem* rather that *B'nei Yisrael* repent for their sins? To me, *Rashi's* explanation makes it seem like the Torah will bear witness by saying, "I told you so." That's not what I would expect.

Another way to approach this *pasuk* is to consider the context in which testimony of a witness becomes necessary. Typically, witnesses do not become relevant until things have gone so wrong that a person must answer to a higher authority for their misdeeds.

Viewed this way, this *pasuk* provides both encouragement and warning: yes, we will transgress, but we have the opportunity to right our wrongs before the Torah steps in as a witness, and the consequences become irreversible. From this perspective, the takeaway from the *pasuk* is cautionary — pull back before it is too late before a witness is needed.

This understanding of the verse makes *Parshat Vayeilech*, which we read on *Shabbat Shuva*, just as relevant today as the new year begins as it was in the closing days of the year.

At YIS, we are fortunate to have a community that cares and looks out for one another in all facets of life — spiritually, socially, educationally, etc. Having such a strong community creates a sense of responsibility that only strengthens our commitment to each other and YIS – and hopefully avoids the "evils and troubles" that may appear in our paths.

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Aaron and Pamela have lived in Scarsdale for over 12 years, and they are the proud parents of Andrew, Emma, and Andrew. They're excited by the tremendous growth the Scarsdale community has undergone in the past two years!

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?
Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com*

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