



The Parsha in Practice

We're Still Standing

Posted by u/not_fork OC: 2 1 month ago
 15.3k [OC] I wrote code to search the web for instances of "During these ____ times" written since the beginning of March. After thousands of results, here's my initial findings.

Internet Search Results For "During these ____ times" Since March 1, 2020

Key words from the word cloud include: unprecedented, trying, difficult, challenging, uncertain, tough, stressful, key, new, momentous, crucial, shocking, extraordinary, anxious, COVID, surreal, prolonged, unsettling, volatile, dire, worrying, unstable, unsettling, tumultuous, turbulent.

As we come to its close, what word would you use to describe the past year 5780? As I think of this question, I am reminded of a graphic I saw on the internet a few months ago which represented the collected data from internet searches - since March - for the following line: "During these ____ times." How would you have filled in that blank?

On the left you can see how it was clearly "difficult" and "challenging" for some, but for a few others was "key" or "new." To some, it felt "uncharted," and yet to others, was somehow "momentous." Of course, these past six(!) months have affected us all in different ways, which would account for these different descriptions in real time, but looking back, what would we say now about those experiences? In retrospective, would we change our minds? Would we use different words?

Having arrived at his last day of life, Parshat Nitzavim begins with the continuation of Moshe's final speech. That day's lesson to the people will include the lofty

goals of Arvut, mutual responsibility, and many other poignant messages. Weirdly though, he buries the lead. He begins with:

אתם נצבים היום כְּלִלְכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְאִשִּׁיכֶם שְׁבִטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשִׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

You stand this day, all of you, before the LORD your God...

Why does he spend the time discussing the set up of the crowd? Why does it matter that they are standing? Get to the point!

Based on a Midrash Tanchuma, Rashi explains that the juxtaposition of the curses that Moshe had just related (that read of last week in Ki Tavo) requires a "shot in the arm" to the people. They had been

horrified to hear about what was at stake in accepting the covenant with G-d, and wondered **מי יוכל** **אתם נצבים היום**? Who can possibly stand against these? To which Moshe responded: **אתם נצבים היום**. YOU are still standing here. You, the Jewish people certainly have not been perfect, and yet, you remain.

R' Sampson Rafael Hirsch points us towards another verse from an earlier section of Moshe's address:

**וזכרת את כל הדרך אשר הליכך ה' אלקיך זה ארבעים שנה במדבר למען ענתך לנסתך לזעת את אשר בלבבך
...התשמר מצותיו אסלא:**

Remember the long way that the LORD your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years, that He might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts: whether you would keep His commandments or not.

The versed continues to speak of G-d who:

המאללך מן במדבר אשר לא ידעו אבותיך למען ענתך ולמען נסתך להיטבך באחריתך:

...who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end.

R' Hirsch points to the Midrash on those words:

אמר הקב"ה אע"פ שהקלות באות עליכם, הן הן מעמידות אתכם, וכן הוא אומר למען ענותך ולמען נסותך להיטיבך באחריתך (דברים ח טז) כך אמר משה לישראל אע"פ שהיסורין באין עליכם יש לכם עמידה, לכך נאמר אתם (לכך נאמר אתם) נצבים.

G-d says, even though suffering befalls you, those very experiences will stand you upright. As it says, "in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end." So too, Moshe said to the Jewish people that although they had been through struggles, they have the ability to persist! This is why he began his message with "You are standing here today."

As R' Hirsch writes: "the suffering itself ensures your lasting endurance, for it will lead to your betterment." The struggles that we face are indeed challenging, but will they always be?

In the heat of the moment, when we face stresses and difficulties, it is hard to think that there will come a day on which we will be able to stand up straight again. It is easy to be focused on the descriptive words we use in that moment and to allow those words to forever define our lasting memories.

Perhaps those (even these) days were "uncharted," but what course have we been able to chart nonetheless? Maybe we were "bewildered," but are we still? Have we learned anything that has cut the fog?

Moshe teaches us an important lesson before he begins his actual curriculum. He reminds us that whatever we have been through, we as a people and as individuals, have incredible resilience, and that throughout it all, we have made - and will continue to make - meaning of even the hardest moments

How would I describe 5780? I'm not sure of what words I'd use, but I know this: we're still standing.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach