

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech 5777

A problem ... about children? Moshe tells us in נצבים what will happen at the End of Days. (Chazal say it's not that far away; it must start some time within the next 222 years; by the year 6,000!) After Galut and suffering the terrifying curses of the Tochachah, the Jewish People will undergo a mass Teshuvah culminating in the Final Redemption:

It will be that when all these things come upon you - the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you - then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem, your G-d, has dispersed you. And you will return to Hashem, your G-d, and listen to His voice, according to everything that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and all your soul. (Devarim 30:1-2)

Notice the underlined words. Moshe is addressing “you and your children”. To whom does the word “children” refer? If to people’s children above bar/bat mitzvah, then they are already included in the “you” (i.e. in the adults) to whom this prophecy about Teshuvah is addressed. If to “children” under bar/bat mitzvah, then they have no obligation in mitzvot – and no sins means they have nothing to repent. So neither! To whom does the word “children” in the prophecy refer?

The Ramban’s view of individual responsibility The Ramban explains this as meaning “you will ... accept upon yourselves and upon your children for all of their generations, to observe all which I command you today” i.e. the acceptance by parents of responsibility for one’s children. In other words, he says that part of an individual’s Teshuvah is to take it upon oneself that one’s children will follow a Torah path. (The words we say after the morning Shema have a similar sentiment – take a look!)

Huh? I’m responsible for my kids ... even after they grow up? There seems to be a problem here. The end of נצבים says:

“...I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring.” (Devarim 30:19)

Free will is core to our world-view. We have the ability to choose not to sin; to choose life, serving Hashem properly and earning a reward in so doing, saving ourselves from “death” here and in Olam Habah. We are strongly recommended to choose life – but it’s our choice. We are responsible for our own actions. Ultimately it is we, and only we, who will have to answer for them.

How, therefore, can the Ramban maintain that one accepts responsibility for the behaviour of one’s children even after they attain the age of majority? What about *their* free choice; and *their* own responsibility to make their own decisions?

The extent of responsibility The answer seems to lie in *our responsibility for choosing a lifestyle for ourselves that helps our children make the proper choices*. There is no guarantee what kind of life they will choose to live but it seems that creating the right framework in which they grow up means we can make it easier for them to make the “right” decisions. Choosing what school they go to, where we go on holiday, what shul we attend – even what car we drive; kids take it all in, making choices easier or more difficult for our children.

It’s a never-ending, all-encompassing, 24/7 deliberation about every aspect of life: “How will what I do affect my children?”. Elul is a good time to re-focus on this in the Teshuvah context of the Pasuk. The Ramban is pointing out how seriously we should take this.

The shul we attend – and gathering everyone together The privilege of “gathering” in a shul like Ner Yisrael is a huge benefit to our children in terms of friends, shiurim, learning, mentors and the environment in which they grow up. In וילך it also speaks about our ancestors gathering together for the Mitzvah of Hakhel (Devarim 31:12):

Gather together the people, the men, women and the small children

Hakhel took place on first day Chol Hamoed Succot after a Shemittah year. Everyone was included: men, women and even small children. Rav Elazar ben Azariah explains (Chagiga 3a) "*The men came to learn; the women came to listen; the children came to give reward to those who brought them.*"

The Malbim explains that although the children could not understand the proceedings, their eyes would be glued to the awesome sight of millions of Jews gathered together for the sole purpose of hearing the Word of G-d. This would leave an indelible impression on them, inspiring them to lead lives of holiness and purity. A child develops a love for what he sees his parents cherish – be it learning, preparing Shabbos or anything else.

Our children are our most precious “possessions”. We create an environment for them, not necessarily based upon what is easiest for ourselves. But we are promised that if we choose well (life), we will ultimately merit (and help our children ultimately merit) to see Moshiach in the End of Days.

We have the זכות to be making a Bar Mitzvah this שבת. As our Bar Mitzvah boy becomes responsible for his own actions this week, we hope to continue to provide the correct environment to ease his path. Ner Yisrael is an important cornerstone of that hard work.

Shabbat shalom!